

ROSI CRUCIAN
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NEOPLATONISM

Each issue of the *Rosicrucian Digest* provides members and all interested readers with a compendium of materials regarding the ongoing flow of the Rosicrucian Timeline. The articles, historical excerpts, art, and literature included in this *Digest* span the ages, and are not only interesting in themselves, but also seek to provide a lasting reference shelf to stimulate continuing study of all of those factors which make up Rosicrucian history and thought. Therefore, we present classical background, historical development, and modern reflections on each of our subjects, using the many forms of primary sources, reflective commentaries, the arts, creative fiction, and poetry.



This magazine is dedicated to all the women and men throughout the ages who have contributed to and perpetuated the wisdom of the Rosicrucian, Western esoteric, Tradition.



May we ever be worthy of the light with which we have been entrusted.



In this issue, we contemplate the Good, the Beauty, and the Love of Neoplatonism, a tradition that has profoundly influenced Western esotericism and all of Western culture.

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NEOPLATONISM: AN INTRODUCTION

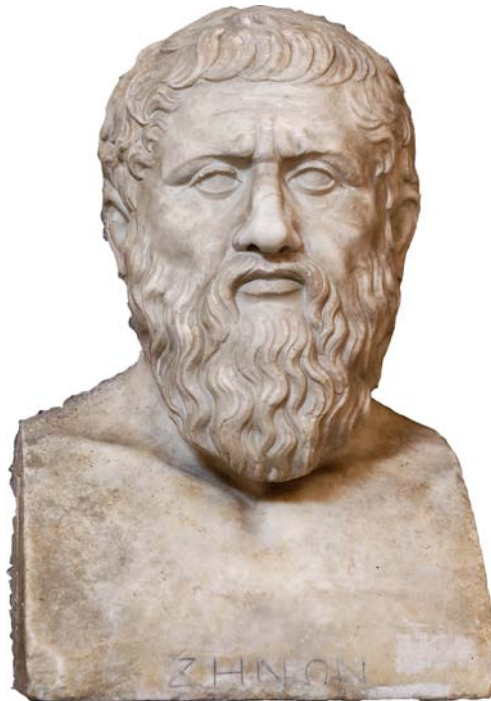


If you live in the Western world today or have been influenced by it, you may be more of a Neoplatonist than you realize. As the mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead stated, the general characterization of the Western philosophical tradition “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”¹

Neoplatonism is a relatively modern term that mid-nineteenth century scholars created to distinguish the ideas of later Greek and Roman Platonists from those of Plato himself. Plotinus (ca. 204 – 270 CE) is considered the first main proponent of Neoplatonism. His intent was to use Plato’s thought as an intellectual basis for a rational and humane life.²

Neoplatonists synthesized the approaches of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and others, addressing the individual yearning for salvation from a philosophical viewpoint. Neoplatonism posits a single source (the One) from which all existence emanates and with which an individual soul can be mystically united. This philosophical school provided ways that the individual could ascend the ladder of being through *theoria* – contemplation of the Divine.

Many widely accepted Neoplatonic concepts have been perpetuated in the West by such diverse sources as Christianity, Sufism, Kabbalah, the art and philosophy of the Renaissance, the Cambridge Platonists, the American Transcendentalists, and others.



Plato (428 BCE – 348 BCE).

Neoplatonic approaches continue to be of tremendous importance in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism, as well as the esoteric schools, including Rosicrucianism. Neoplatonism exerted a great influence on the Western esoteric tradition through the work of Marsilio Ficino, a devout Neoplatonist, translator, and humanist philosopher of the fifteenth century.

The following Rosicrucian tenets resonate with Neoplatonism:

- All of Creation is permeated by a Universal Soul.
- The ultimate goal of life is to achieve mystical union with the Divine (the One).
- Knowing oneself is essential to achieving this goal.
- This can be accomplished without an intermediary person.
- Mystical contemplation is a means to achieve union with the Divine.

- Contemplating the harmony and transcendental nature of the Beautiful and the Good elevates us in consciousness.
- After completing its spiritual evolution, the soul of each human being reintegrates with the Universal Soul in all purity and lives in the Divine Immanence in full consciousness.

Remarkable individuals such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Augustine of Hippo (Saint Augustine), Hypatia, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Avicenna, Paracelsus, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Raphael, Henry More, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Taylor, and Ralph Waldo Emerson have all been associated with Neoplatonism or Neoplatonic thought.

This issue of the Rosicrucian Digest introduces us to some of their lives and ideas, and the Neoplatonic tradition over the millennia.

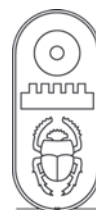
As for the Rosicrucian conception of spirituality, it is based, on the one hand, upon the conviction that the Divine exists as an Absolute Intelligence having created the universe and everything therein; and, on the other hand, on the assurance that each human being possesses a soul which emanates from the Divine.

—From the Rosicrucian *Positio Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* (2001)

ENDNOTES

¹ Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

² PBS, “Neoplatonism,” <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/neoplat-body.html>.



MYSTICISM

IN THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURES

Peter Bindon, FRC

Peter Bindon, FRC, is a professional anthropologist and botanist. He recently retired as Grand Master of the English Grand Lodge for Australia, Asia, and New Zealand after many years of service in this position. In this article, Frater Bindon takes us on a journey through *Mysticism in the Evolution of Cultures* and shares some of the many correspondences of Rosicrucianism and Neoplatonic concepts.



One of the costs today's humans have had to bear as a result of the all-too-fast technological development which followed on from the scientific and industrial revolutions is the inexorable loss of our links with the earth and more importantly alienation from our spiritual source.

To most of us, and perhaps in every age, progress is looked upon as synonymous with the improvement of material conditions. A civilization which can produce laser eye surgery, space travelers, super railways, and atomic fusion is generally regarded as being advanced. But the enlightened few of every period in history have always recognized that true civilization is something more than material development, and that "something" is spiritualization. They have recognized that material advancements are only instruments for providing the leisure and opportunity for the development of the spirit. The nearer the human race approaches to the Central Spirit of the universe, to the Cosmic, the further it will have progressed.

During the rise of materialism, many of the world's cultures deeply repressed or even denied the organic processes that link humans with nature; these processes are birth, reproduction, and death. Simultaneously, the spiritual awareness that once provided humanity with a sense of meaningful belonging to the cosmos was replaced by disbelief in a Cosmic force, or superficial religious activities of decreasing vitality and relevance. Happily, Rosicrucians have maintained their interest in a positive relationship with the Cosmic and are striving to be practical and constructive in offering something to the world that will assist each and every human to advance this spiritual quest. But, you ask, by what mechanism can humanity achieve this goal of advancement?

The mechanism that advances civilization towards spirituality is mysticism, of which we Rosicrucians are probably all practitioners. And there are suggestions that outside the Order an unprecedented renaissance of interest in the psychology of mysticism and the spiritual inter-relationships that exist between all beings in the universe are developing among more and more individuals.

So, what is mysticism and what are its origins? The non-theological use of the word "mystical" in English, meaning "a hidden or secret thing" dates from about 1300 CE and arrives in English from Anglo-French where it is *misterie* (O.Fr. *mistere*). It came into French from the Latin *mysterium*, but its origin was from the Greek *mysterion* meaning "secret rite or doctrine," but of course, mysticism is itself much older than

this label for it. It is clear that mysticism implies a relationship to mystery.

Many philosophers refer to mysticism as being either a religious tendency and desire of the human soul towards an intimate union with the Divinity, or as a system growing out of such a tendency and desire. These contentions assume that the so-called Divinity, about which they speak, is the absolute and ultimate state of existence. This may or may not be so, but, are mysticism and religion inextricably related? I think not. Mystical contemplation and spiritual expression can take place both inside and outside the realm of religious belief and religious dogma.

Usually a mystical experience is filled with intense feelings and may involve a dialogue with or a direct encounter with ultimate reality; what we call the “Cosmic.” The “mystery” here is defining the identity of the something or someone greater than human comprehension that has been encountered during the mystical exercise. In the West, it is only in the last 2,000 years or so that mystical experience has come to mean a direct experience of the divine; and since, in theory at least, Christianity is the religion of love, the Christian “mystical” experience is spoken of as a “spiritual marriage.” For myself, I believe that a successful mystical experience may depend less on the particulars of the given occurrence than on what happens because of it.

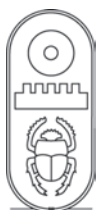
Mystical experiences are shaped by culture and tradition. Accounts of their experiences provided by mystics are inevitably influenced by the culture in which they live and by their professed religious tradition. In the first case it is because language and linguistic references and expressions are determined by culture

and in the second instance it is because most religions contain the language that is most called upon when talking of the ultimate entity or the infinite. In fact, as we have seen, it is well-nigh impossible to examine mysticism in popular writings without also encountering religion, so intertwined have the two become since the advent of organized religion in the world. So Western mystics rarely claim that their experience dissolved them into the being of ultimate reality because Western theism insists that human beings never literally become God, or the divine. On the other hand Eastern mystics often describe the ultimate state of their spiritual experience as involving complete physical and sensory union with what we might call “Cosmic Consciousness.”

All mystical experiences, therefore, vary somewhat. Each is unique, but the uniqueness does not diminish or negate the claim for transcendence or touching ultimate reality despite the comment that the mystical experience itself is in part a function of what the mystic thinks can happen. Many mystics say that speech breaks down and is inadequate to describe their state, that silence is more appropriate, and that even silence is not adequate. This dimension of the mystical experience, although ultimately inseparable from the culture and personality of each mystic, transcends or rises above cultures, and applies to Christians as much as to Aboriginal people. And here lies a difficulty.

What prehistoric humans thought can never be known with certainty, because they did not write it down. The materials that they left behind them, like tools, weapons, works of art, burials, and the rest, can be interpreted in many ways, but even then we may not arrive at the actual interpretation.

A successful mystical experience may depend less on the particulars of the given occurrence than on what happens because of it.



At best, material objects comprise a fragmentary record of the many different human groups who have lived in a variety of physical environments over a period of time far longer than that of recorded history. And even after written records begin to appear, because describing spiritual ecstasy is so difficult we have few documents that can tell us what previous cultures and civilizations thought about this activity.

However, some deductions about what our ancestors thought about life and death, the two major concerns they had as we ourselves have, can perhaps be drawn from the burial practices and tools of a subgroup of humans known as Neanderthals. These folk buried their dead with care, indicating their affection for the deceased. They included food and equipment in the graves which suggests they had a belief in an afterworld of some kind, in which the dead were not entirely cut off from the living. It also implies that they understood one factor which distinguishes humans from other animals; the knowledge of their own inevitable death. This remains the basis of one of the great mysteries of life. And thus, like we do, they understood that time passes and results in death and then ... ?

In turn, a sense of time implies the concept of order, of events following one another in succession, suggesting that Neanderthals understood the pattern of birth, life, and death that underlies human existence—that we are born, live for a time, and then die. They must have observed that the same cycle is true of plants and of animals. Perhaps it was this understanding that brought these early humans to the conclusion that behind the order of nature lay something beyond and above the plants, the animals, and even above themselves. After all, the task of the shaman, the person who was perhaps more perceptive or spiritually inclined than others in their group, was to attempt to make contact with that supernatural something that lay beyond human knowledge. We might imagine

that these early humans conceived of the supernatural “something” as a super-human that was in control of the order of nature.

Evidence of some sort of religio-magical cult, dating from about 100,000 BCE, has been found in caves in the European Alps where the skulls of bears had been placed on stone slabs in what looks like a ceremonious arrangement. Firstly, this action suggests that these relics were set apart from the mundane and were considered special in some way; and secondly, it indicates that the cave itself may have been thought to be a sacred place. Does the selection of skulls for this arrangement demonstrate that they thought a creature’s head contained the essence of its being? Certainly the intention of the rituals of later bear-hunting peoples was to appease some supernatural power for the killing of a bear, to make sure that there would be no decline in the supply of bears for hunting. Thus, we discover that the idea that an animating essence or spirit inhabits all aspects of Nature. The idea that every hill or stream or tree or living thing has a soul is one of the oldest of human beliefs.

People with limited control over their environment are likely to have tried to establish some kind of relationship with their own ancestors, from whom they have inherited such knowledge of the workings of nature as they possess. Their reason for this contact with their ancestors would most likely be to try to gain some control over the powers that give order to Nature. They needed to ensure that food supplies were maintained, that their animals were fruitful, and that children were born. No doubt, they also needed to act in some way to appease Nature which sometimes disastrously fails to provide the necessities.

In the Upper Paleolithic period (between about 30,000 to 10,000 BCE), after the arrival on the scene of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as we like to call ourselves, burials become more elaborate and ceremonious, and there is strong evidence of the people’s concern for fertility in the “Venus figures,” small



Venus figure.

figurines of women, some highly stylized and others comparatively realistic, found in a number of archaeological contexts across Europe. The swollen pregnant abdomens of many of these figures and their blank, featureless heads suggest that they were not meant to portray particular women but a more abstract idea of “woman” in general, and especially woman in her role of mother. They may have been worn by women as amulets to ensure fruitfulness and they may have represented a Great Mother, the source of all life.

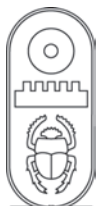
The Upper Palaeolithic is also the time when the magnificent cave art of Europe was produced. If the purpose of this art included a desire to promote fertility amongst the animal species portrayed as well as to assist hunting, then we might conclude that the society in which the artists lived, believed in a supernatural order of reality that humans must try to influence in order that they and their quarry are to eat, live, and procreate.

Perhaps this also implies that these people had ideas of magical symbolism in which a real state of affairs can be influenced in some way through mimicry and simulated situations.

Neanderthals did not wear ornaments, so far as is known, but the later Palaeolithic peoples did. They made necklaces of animals’ teeth or cowrie shells, for instance, and carved bracelets from mammoths’ tusks. It seems likely that ornaments contained an ingredient of magic, as they have tended to do ever since. The teeth may have carried with them the qualities of the animals from which they came, and in many times and many cultures the cowrie shell has been an emblem of the feminine and fertility.

The so-called “Neolithic revolution,” which saw the gradual development of cultivating crops and breeding animals, instead of gathering and hunting, originated in Asia in the ninth millennium BCE or earlier, and spread over most of Europe by about 3500 BCE. Our picture now becomes, if anything, even more obscure than before and the course of the transition from what is known of the Palaeolithic to the religions of societies with written records is not at all clear.

It seems evident that as agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry are gradually established during the Neolithic period, the annual cycle of Nature becomes a dominating factor in human life and a focus of religious and magical attention. Unlike the aggressive hunter, the passive farmer relies more on the slow workings of forces which are still largely beyond human control. Hunting’s perspectives are relatively





short-term and farming's are relatively long. The sense of an order behind Nature, of human dependence on it, and of the perils of disorder in the shape of drought, famine, destructive storms, pestilence, may have been strengthened by the longer perspective of farming communities. There are scattered pieces of evidence confirming that agricultural people worshipped fertility deities. Seedtime and harvest were the two great occasions of the year, and likely to be celebrated with festivals and rites intended to ensure a good crop. And it appears that undertaking ceremonies and performing rituals that would ensure fruitfulness were among the basic concerns of prehistoric humans, and probably represent humanity's earliest religious ceremonies.

The sky also becomes important, because sun, rain, and wind affect the growth of crops and because the calendar, which successful agriculture demands, is worked out by the reference to events occurring in the sky. (Reverence for the sky and its forces may easily have existed long before, though there is no evidence of sky worship in the Paleolithic.) But as we will see, the new emphasis on the sky will bring significant changes to the world.

Most Neolithic societies buried their dead with greater pomp and circumstance

than previously, especially those individuals who had been powerful in life. Sometimes, as in megalithic burials in Europe, or pyramid burials in ancient Egypt, constructing the graves involved immense and extravagant toil implying a deep respect for the powers of the dead personage and probably the belief that they influenced the growth of crops from the earth in which they lay buried. Representations of the mother goddess are often found in burying places and she seems clearly connected with the earth.

Thus humanity arrived at a point where they realized that we are and always remain part of a universe. It is a living universe and is animated with what I will call Spirit, and that Spirit lies at the core of existence in this universe. It is a dynamic force which permeates the universe from its center to its circumference. Each of us has it in ourselves and by it we are being continually acted upon. It burns within us, and we are bathed by its energy. But there are times when this force is peculiarly insistent and urgent within us. And there are times when it presses upon us with urgency from without. And there are rare occasions when the urge from within and the pressure from without meet and correspond. Then we have the ecstasy of mystical experience in its fullness as an

interaction or connection is established between the individual self and the universal whole and during which the self enters into a new state of being. The most we can guess about what mystical practitioners were enacting or thinking at this point in prehistory is deduced from enigmatic paintings made by the artists of the time in caves and in secluded caverns.

As people began to master new techniques in their material lives, inventions and discoveries were fitted into a religio-magical context, but the people who made these discoveries recorded precious little about their spiritual lives. The discovery of yeast, for example, made it possible to bake bread and brew beer, commodities which both had a long history of symbolic connections with the deities and the otherworld. The rise of metallurgy with the development of working in copper, bronze, and iron gave the smith the uncanny powers of one who was as much magician as craftsman. The seasonal progression of the agricultural cycles was still disrupted by climatic variability, which less sophisticated people put down to supernatural interference. Although we have some evidence of ceremonies and rituals whose aim was to appease wrathful deities, we know nothing of the spiritual quests of individuals during these chaotic ages.

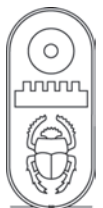
The advance of towns, states, and armies in central Europe, with their male dynasties and priesthoods, tended to diminish the earthly Great Mother's status in favor of male gods of the sky who came to dominate the civilizations of the ancient world. Egyptian, Greek, and Roman stories told of the exploits of the sky-dwelling gods as they created the universe, made humanity, established order, and put down disorder. In far Western Europe the invasions and conquests of warrior peoples, whose deities were gods of the sky, also lessened the influence of the Great Mother.

Although we have little information

regarding the attitude of peasants and laborers in ancient Egypt towards mysticism, the fact that they collected many prayers and invocations to be recited over the deceased in his or her coffin or even by the entombed deceased demonstrates that some of the presumed results of mystical activity were certainly within their understanding.

There is little Mysticism in the earliest schools of Greek philosophy, but it becomes important by the time of the philosophical system of Plato. It is especially evident in his theory of the world of ideas, of the origin of the world soul and the human soul, and in his doctrine of recollection and intuition. The Alexandrian Jew named Philo, who lived between 30 BCE and 50 BCE, taught that people, by freeing themselves from matter and receiving illumination from the divine, may reach a mystical, ecstatic, or prophetic state in which they become absorbed into Divinity. But the most systematic attempt at formulating a philosophical system of a mystical character was that by the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria, especially that of Plotinus, arguably the greatest philosopher-mystic the world has ever known, who lived between 205 and 270 CE.

In his *Enneads*, Plotinus sets out a system which has as its central idea the concept that there exists a process of ceaseless emanation and out-flowing from the One, the Absolute. He illustrates this concept using metaphors such as the radiation of heat from fire, of cold from snow, fragrance from a flower, or light from the Sun. This theme leads him to the maxim that "good diffuses itself" (*bonum diffusivum sui*). He concludes that entities that have achieved perfection of their own being do not keep that perfection to themselves, but spread it out by generating an external image of their internal activity. The ultimate goal of human life and of philosophy is to realize the mystical return of the soul to the Divine. Freeing itself from the sensuous world by



purification, the human soul ascends by successive steps through the various degrees of the metaphysical order, until it unites itself in communion with the One. Now, I am sure that you recognize some of our present-day Rosicrucian principles in there.



Great Chain of Being by Robert Fludd (1617).

It was Plotinus who gave us the image of the Great Chain, used in later times by our own Rosicrucian alchemists and theorists to draw symbolic spherical diagrams of up to twelve concentric spheres representing: matter, life, sensation, perception, impulse, images, concepts, logical faculties, creative reason, world soul, nous, and the One.

The development of a particularly masculine outlook in cultures occurred over long stretches of time and the details of its advance across the settled world are largely unknown, but there was inexorable continuity in its spread. Admittedly, the Earth Mother of prehistory, in her various local incarnations, did become the ancestress of goddesses of later societies, but it seems that her times were past. It is worth observing that although her world had been uncertain, the new era of the masculine sky gods was no more settled.

Essentially mysticism brought to

the world religion, but despite perhaps being the carrier of mystical principle and methods, mysticism is not religion, nor as I have already mentioned is it necessarily religious. Mysticism belongs to the core of most religions and many commenced after their founder experienced a powerful and immediate mediate contact with the spiritual essence, their godhead. However, a lesser number of religions were prepared to allow their adherents to establish this kind of contact with the Cosmic for themselves, but rather kept this task firmly in the hands of a priesthood or the appointed leaders.

The Cosmic is also commonly called the One, and you and I are in some sense that One. This means that the inmost self of humans is identical with the Absolute, with the unchanging power against which the whole changing universe must be seen. Thus, one lives not only with one's own life but also with the life of the whole universe. This universal life is founded in a changeless Being which is at the same time one's own eternity. It was this understanding which made it possible for the poet Tennyson to say that death was "an almost laughable impossibility."

These latter are some of the ideas that we have inherited from those cultures that have proceeded through history before us. We carry their heritage. Some of their ideas and concepts have been discarded as humans came to new understandings of how the many parts of this complex Universe fit together. Some ideas and concepts remain relatively unchanged. As Rosicrucians we recognize that the final goal of all mystical experience is connection with that divine infinity which lies beyond matter and mind, but which can transform them. The approach to this ultimate state is through the power of discriminating thought and purified emotions and, as Henry More, one of the Cambridge Platonists, stressed: "God reserves His choicest secrets for the purest minds."

EMANATION AND RETURN TO THE ONE

Lloyd Abrams, Ph.D., FRC

In this article, RCUI Instructor Lloyd Abrams, Ph.D., FRC, explains the Neoplatonist doctrine of “Emanation and Return” and presents some of its many applications throughout the history of Western Esotericism.



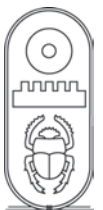
The Neoplatonist doctrine of “Emanation and Return” is a central organizing theme of the Western Esoteric Tradition. In Neoplatonism, the source of everything, the highest divinity and ultimate reality, is “the One,” a formless, infinite, simple unity. As such, it is beyond comprehension by the physical senses and rational thought. For Neoplatonists, “all theoretical discussions of the One are finally inadequate, since its true nature is revealed only in the mystical union.”¹ Plotinus likened the One to a fountain that overflows, and it is this out-flowing or emanation from the One that gives rise to all of the other levels of existence. In this model, creation is a sequential, stepwise process, from higher and more perfect levels down to lower and lower levels, finally ending with the material world of multiplicity and oppositions.

What exactly is it that emanates or flows out of the One? Since the One is a simple unity, without component parts or separate attributes, it must be the stuff of the One itself, infinite and unknowable. As we have seen, Plotinus compared it to water overflowing from a fountain. Light is often used as a metaphor for this divine flow, as light is non-material and expands infinitely in all directions. Sometimes terms like

Spirit or spiritual energy are used to express this sense of flowing. The word “spirit” is related to wind or breath, both of which are flowing air. The Neoplatonists sometimes used more abstract terms, such as “causation” or “influence” flowing downward from one level to the next. Whatever terminology we encounter in the various esoteric systems, we should remember that these are all metaphors for a metaphysical concept rather than descriptions of a physical process.

Plotinus’s model includes three “hypostases,” or fundamental levels of reality. The first and highest is the unknowable “One,” which emanates the next level, called *Nous*, translated as Divine Mind or Intelligence. This second level contains the Platonic Forms or Ideas, which we can know intellectually, and so this level is also called the Intelligible World. *Nous* then emanates the next lower level, *Psychē* or Soul, which animates the physical world and serves as an intermediary between the Intelligible World and the material world we know with our physical senses. Later Neoplatonists added more and more intermediaries and multiple levels of being to Plotinus’s original model, but the basic idea remained the same. Everything comes from an original ineffable unity by a process of sequential emanation, resulting in a graded hierarchy of levels or states of being, from the highest divinity down to the lowest materiality. This hierarchical structure has been called “The Great Chain of Being.”

There are two seemingly conflicting implications inherent in this model. First, the sequential emanation of successively



lower and lower levels of being emphasizes how we and our physical world are so separated from the divine level and so far from connection with the One. Emanation proceeds farther and farther from the original source, and each level differs more and more from the original unity and perfection of the One. At the same time, however, since everything arises by a process of emanation from the One, everything is ultimately composed of the same basic stuff as the One. Therefore, in its deepest essence, even the lowliest particle of inert matter shares a common nature with the One. So there is a profound connection, or unity, underlying the apparent multiplicity of the physical world, and of the entire hierarchy of worlds. That is why it is possible for us to strive to return to our source, the One. The Neoplatonists asserted that all things naturally desire to return to their source, to re-unite with their cause. As the One is the first cause of everything, all things have an inherent tendency to return to the One. This Neoplatonist picture of emanation followed by striving for reintegration is referred to as the doctrine of "Procession and Return."

In the Individual Human Life

In addition to applying to the history and structure of the universe, this pattern of procession and return also applies to the individual human life. The Neoplatonists believed that each human soul originates from the divine level, and that it descends through the seven spheres of the planets to arrive on earth and enter a physical body. As it descends, the soul is "stained" and weighed down by taking on characteristics from each of the planets it passes near. (That is how one's personality and fate are affected by the positions of the various planets at the time of birth.) During one's life, the soul is described as imprisoned within the physical body. At the time of death, if the soul has not been too attached to the material world

and the pleasures of the physical senses, it can be freed to rise back up through the seven planetary spheres, being progressively purified by giving back at each level what it had taken on during its descent, until it regains its original purity and finally returns to re-unite with the One.

Mysticism is attempting to make that return trip to divine union while one is still alive, rather than waiting until after death. For the Neoplatonists, the model remains the same. Mystics purify themselves by not being too attached to the physical world and the pleasures of the senses, and by living in accord with the divine will. Then, by engaging in various means, such as meditation, prayer, and ritual practices, the mystic sends his or her soul or consciousness up through the spheres toward re-union with the One.

The Neoplatonist doctrine of "Procession and Return" underlies many aspects of the Western Esoteric Tradition. This archetypal theme of a Fall from a perfect state of unity and divinity into the material world of multiplicity and oppositions, and striving to eventually re-unite with the original divine oneness, is prevalent in many spiritual traditions and common cultural concepts. In other branches of the Western Esoteric Tradition, the mystical return to the One is known as the spiritual ascent, union with God, reintegration, etc.

In Mystical Religious Traditions

In Jewish Kabbalah, the material world is seen as the end product of a series of successive emanations from the original infinite oneness, called *Ain Sof*. In one version, the *Ain Sof* emanates the highest, most spiritual world (the World of Nearness), which in turn emanates the next lower level (the World of Creation), which emanates the next lower level (the World of Formation), which emanates our physical world (the World of Action). In another version, the *Ain Sof* emanates a series of ten *Sefirot*, or

vessels for the Divine Light. Each vessel (*Sefirah*) emanates the next lower vessel. At each successive level, the *Sefirot* become more and more “dense” and the Divine Light is more and more veiled, culminating again in our material world. One can then engage in meditation and other esoteric practices in an attempt to raise the soul (or consciousness) up through the four worlds or the ten *Sefirot* to obtain a direct experience of Divinity.

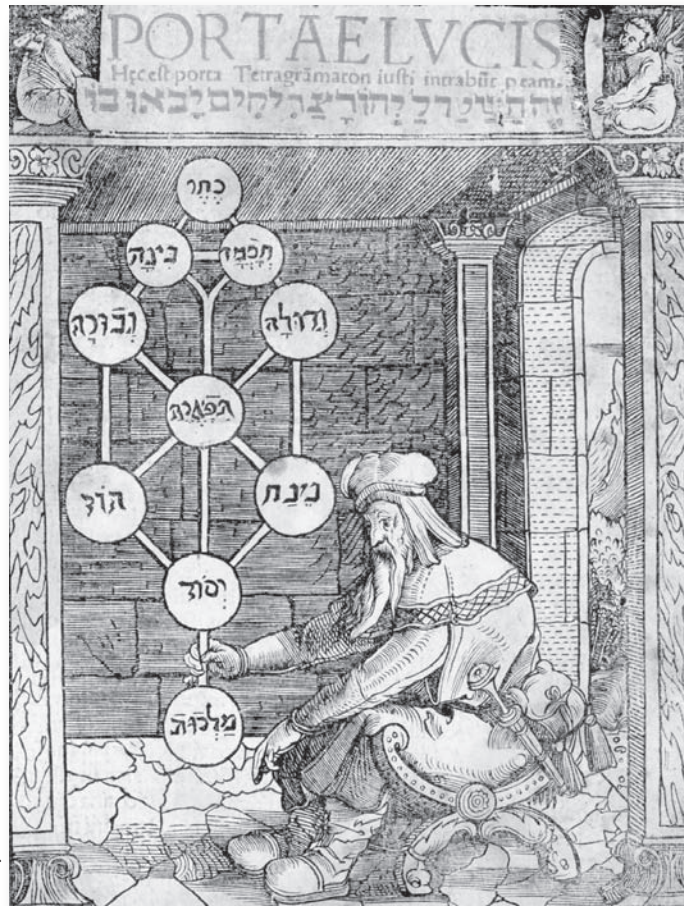
Another system of spiritual ascent was used in the pre-Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism known as *Merkavah* Mysticism (the Way of the Chariot), which consisted of raising the soul up through a series of seven holy palaces (*Hekhalot*). The goal was to reach the seventh and highest palace, where one could obtain a vision of God’s throne similar to the one described by the prophet Ezekiel. This is reminiscent of the Neoplatonist ascent through the seven planetary spheres to re-unite with the One.

In esoteric Islam, the Sufi master Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan said that the essence of Sufism is “the story of every soul’s descent into existence, its experiences of suffering brought about by separation from its original state of being, and the subsequent journey of return and reawakening to its Divine nature.”²

Jacob Boehme said the same thing about the essence of Christianity:

The whole Christian religion consists in this: that we learn to know ourselves, what we are, where we have come from, how we left unity and entered into multiplicity, evil, and disjointed, strife-filled life, and where we are to return from this life in time. All that is necessary for us to know about religion derives from

this: to come out of disunity and vanity, and to enter again into the one tree from which all of us stem.³

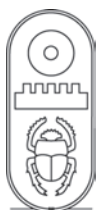


The first representation of the sephirotic tree in print, in Joseph Gikatilla, *Portae Lucis* (Doors of Light), translated by Paulus Ricius (Augsburg, Germany: 1516).

The Christian Neoplatonist known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite described a hierarchy of nine orders of angels who exemplified the process of cosmic emanation by passing on diminishing amounts of Divine Light to each subsequent lower level:

Hierarchy . . . ensures that when [the first rank of angels] . . . have received this full and divine splendor they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God’s will to beings further down the scale.⁴

. . . [God] supernaturally pours out in splendid revelations to the superior beings the full and initial brilliance of his astounding light, and successive beings in their turn receive their share of the



divine beam, through the mediation of their superiors. The beings who are first to know God . . . ungrudgingly impart to [those below them] the glorious ray which has visited them so that their inferiors may pass this on to those yet farther below them. Hence, on each level, predecessor hands on to successor whatever of the divine light he has received and this, in providential proportion, is spread out to every being.⁵

Martinism teaches that our original estate is divine, but that there was a Fall from this original divine status to a degraded state of conflict and chaos, and that our purpose and goal is to return to that original Divine Estate, a process called “reintegration.” Louis Claude de Saint-Martin said that Divine Union is the true end of man; that we are all widowed and we are called to a second marriage.⁶

In addition to individually seeking reunion or reintegration with Divinity for ourselves, in Martinism, as in Lurianic Kabbalah, human beings have the special purpose and function of bringing about the reintegration of the entire world with its divine source. In the Kabbalistic system of Isaac Luria, sparks of the emanated divine light have become trapped or imprisoned within the matter of the physical world, and the practices of Kabbalah serve to liberate those holy sparks and raise them back up to their divine source. This process of raising the holy sparks of light is called *Tikkun Olam*, or “repairing the world.” *Tikkun*, or repairing, is associated with the Kabbalistic concept of the *Mashiach*, or Messiah. In the Martinist tradition, Martínez de Pasquales and Louis Claude de Saint-Martin also used this same term, “The Repairer,” to refer to the Christ.⁷ Gershom Scholem, pioneer of the modern academic study of Kabbalah, often translated the Kabbalistic concept of *Tikkun* as “reintegration.”⁸

In the Bible

The book of Genesis provides a version of “procession” from divine oneness in the story of the Fall of Man. Adam and Eve are exiled from communion with God in Paradise and expelled into the terrestrial world. There is a tradition that the angel Raziel taught Kabbalah to Adam so that human beings might one day return to Paradise to be re-united with God.

In the book of Exodus [13:3], Egypt is called “The House of Bondage.”⁹ The condition of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt is analogous to the Neoplatonist description of the human soul as imprisoned within the physical body. Leaving Canaan and going “down into Egypt” is an echo of Adam’s Fall from Paradise. It is followed by a return via the Exodus from Egypt to a direct encounter with God at Mount Sinai. Thereafter, God literally dwells among the people. The *Shekhinah*, God’s presence in the terrestrial world, was said actually to reside in the Tabernacle and later in Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem.

There was another echo of this archetypal pattern when Nebuchadnezzar’s army destroyed Solomon’s Temple and carried the Israelites out of Jerusalem into exile in Babylonia. When Babylon was later conquered by the Persians, the Israelites were permitted to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the Temple. Stories of exile and yearning for restoration are also versions of the archetypal theme of “Procession and Return.”

Each of the ten *Sefirot* in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life symbolizes the expression of Divinity on a different level in the sequence of emanations, and each *Sefirah* carries a different Name of God. So it seems as if the Divine Oneness itself is fragmented into separate entities. The *Shekhinah* is the manifestation of the Divine Presence here in the terrestrial world, as distinct from *Ain Sof*,

the infinite and transcendent Godhead. In a sense, God is in exile from Himself. But the Biblical prophet Zechariah [14:9] says that one day “God will be One and His Name will be One.” Martinism speaks of reintegrating Divinity, and this is also a major aspect of Lurianic Kabbalah. Re-uniting the various aspects of God as they are manifested at each level of emanation is thus another expression of the theme of Procession and Return.

In Cultural Concepts

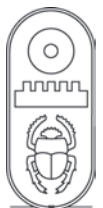
Another version of the theme of a Fall from an earlier splendor to the current debased condition is expressed in the idea of the Golden Age. According to this idea, at some time in the past, people were wiser and more noble, they possessed secret knowledge that has been lost, they were closer to Divinity and more in harmony with natural laws. But, for various reasons, humanity has degenerated, become more selfish and corrupt, and has lost the higher knowledge necessary for restoring our original status. But it is possible for us to regain the lost wisdom and return to our previous noble estate. The story of Atlantis is a well-known version of this archetypal pattern.

The Renaissance humanists believed in an ancient *prisca theologia*, or primordial religious tradition, which contained the highest knowledge of Divinity, and which had been lost over time. This motivated their interest in rediscovering and translating works from ancient Greek philosophy, the Hermetic writings, and the Jewish Kabbalah. They believed that all of these traditions flowed from the same, more ancient source, the *prisca theologia*. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Christian Kabbalist Johann Reuchlin wrote that “Pythagoras drew his stream of learning from the boundless sea of the Kabbalah,”¹⁰ and “Almost all Pythagoras’ system is derived from the Kabbalists.”¹¹ The Renaissance humanists hoped that by rediscovering the ancient pagan and Jewish esoteric traditions and incorporating them into their Christian system, they could regain the previous, more intimate and authentic, relationship with Divinity.

Another example of this same theme is the idea of the Noble Savage; that primitive cultures are more beneficent, more moral, and more attuned to Divinity and natural law, and that modern society has fallen from this noble status to become corrupt, debased, and disconnected from our source.



Moses on Mount Sinai. Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904).



This is also echoed in the concept of childhood as an idealized state of natural goodness and closeness to Divinity, which is debased and lost through the corrupting effects of childrearing practices, socialization, and education.

In its most generalized form, this archetype finds expression in the ubiquitous human experience of nostalgia, the yearning to return to an earlier and better existence.

Uniting Heaven and Earth

Return or reintegration can also be expressed as uniting the Divine world and the physical world. This is expressed in some Gnostic Christian writings.

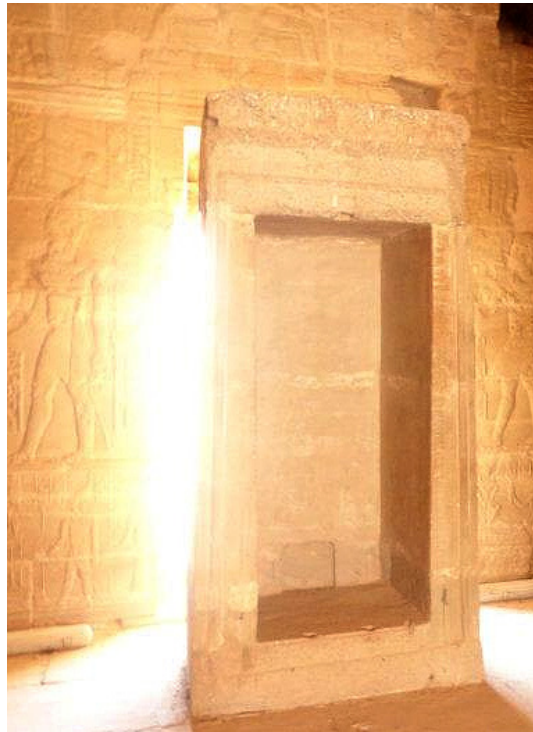
In the Bruce Codex, a Coptic papyrus from the second or third century, Jesus says:

Happy is the man . . . who has brought down Heaven unto Earth, who has taken the Earth and raised it to the Heavens, so that they are no longer divided. . . If you know my Word you may make Heaven descend upon Earth so that it may abide in you.¹²

A verse from the Gospel of Thomas says:

His students said to him,
When will the kingdom come?
Yeshua said,
It will not come because you are watching for it. No one will announce, "Look here it is," or "Look, there it is." The father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people do not see it.¹³

And so, reintegration with the One can also mean an enduring change in consciousness, in which we integrate the highest states of consciousness into our daily lives, so that we experience the unity underlying the multiplicity of the world; we see the radiance of the Divine Light shining through the veil of matter; we experience the presence of God in our everyday lives.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 59.
- ² Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, *Awakening: A Sufi Experience* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 3-4.
- ³ Arthur Versluis, ed., *The Wisdom of Jacob Böhme* (Minneapolis: New Grail Publishing, 2003), 13.
- ⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*. In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 154 [165A].
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 178 [301B-301C].
- ⁶ "Portrait de M. de Saint-Martin, fait par lui-même," in *Œuvres Posthumes*, 2 vols., 1807. Cited in A. E. Waite, *Saint-Martin: The French Mystic and the Story of Modern Martinism* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1992), 19.
- ⁷ Christian Rebisse, "Ieschouah: Grand Architect of the Universe," *Pantacle 2* (2002): 3.
- ⁸ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 38-39.
- ⁹ Biblical translations in this article use the King James Version.
- ¹⁰ Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah [De Arte Cabalistica]*, trans. Martin & Sarah Goodman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 233.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 241.
- ¹² Cited in Nevill Drury, *The Gods of Rebirth* (London: Prism Press, 1988), 54.
- ¹³ *The Gospel of Thomas*. In *The Gnostic Bible*, eds. Willis Barnstone & Marvin Meyer (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 69.

THE STRANGE ENIGMA OF PLOTINUS

Charles Getts

For five centuries after the death of Aristotle in 322 BCE, the ancient Western world produced no great philosophers. The grandeur and power of Rome had risen to its zenith and was now sinking. The classic deities were beginning to fade before the light of the new religion, Christianity. Then, in the third century, all of the glory of old Greece in the days of the great Plato returned in the genius of a humble man by the name of Plotinus. While some of the world's thinkers, since his time, have not agreed with his ideas, and many have not understood them, they have all accorded him the highest accolades. In this article, Charles Getts introduces us to "The Strange Enigma of Plotinus."



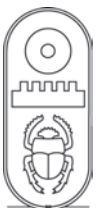
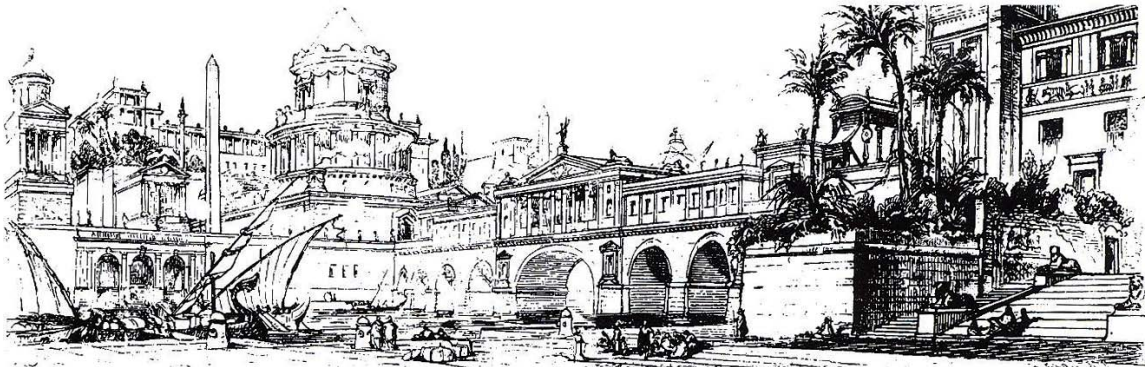
He has been called one of the world's greatest mystic-philosophers as well as the greatest individual thinker between Aristotle and Descartes. Plotinus is considered to have surpassed Plato, the man whose teachings he so admired, in spiritual profundity of thought. He added the fire of inspiration to Neoplatonism, the last school of Greek

philosophy, and his name is often given as its founder instead of that of Ammonius Saccas. After his death, his writings had an incalculable effect upon Christianity up to the period of the Middle Ages.

Then, if these words of praise from later historians are true, why were his ideas and teachings seemingly lost to the world and his name now known to few apart from students interested in ancient philosophy?

Let us consider the few facts and the scattered information that have come down to us regarding his life. Then, as we consider a small part of his writings expressing a few of the ideas of his great mystical philosophy, together with the later course of history at that time, we will be able to piece together the answer to this enigma.

He was born in Lycopolis, Egypt, in either 204 or 205 CE. As his name is Roman, it is believed that his parents were of Roman descent. This is conjecture as Plotinus never talked of his parents or of his personal life. As it is known from his writings that he believed in reincarnation, one writer is of the opinion that his reticence in talking of his private life indicated his regret and



even shame at the necessity of being reborn upon Earth. In his youth he is said to have searched for knowledge in the great Egyptian city of Alexandria which was a center of world culture and outranked even the glory of Athens. In it stood Jewish synagogues as well as temples for the worship of the deities of Egypt; Greek schools of idealistic theories competed for disciples with the preachers of Christianity. It was here, in Alexandria, that Plotinus, now twenty-eight years of age, found a teacher of the ideas of Plato whose name was Ammonius Saccas.

Saccas, who was known as the “Divinity-instructed,” was also the teacher of Origen, recognized as one of the world’s greatest scholars. He left no writings but there is little doubt that he was an Initiate and well informed as to the occult teachings including the Egyptian Mysteries. He must have also been acquainted with Indian religion.

It was probably an introduction to the teachings of Buddha given to him by Saccas that made Plotinus determine to learn more of Indian and also Persian religions. After ten years of study under his brilliant teacher, he left Alexandria and joined the Emperor Gordian III in an expedition to the East in the year 244 CE. This soon proved to be disastrous when the Emperor was murdered and Plotinus was forced to flee to the city of Antioch. Later in this same year he went to Rome where he lived the rest of his life.

School of Mystical Philosophy

It was in Rome, at the age of forty, that Plotinus formed a school in which he taught a mystical-philosophical system based on the ideas of both Plato and Aristotle as well as upon his own experiences in cosmic revelation while in a state of superconsciousness.

For many years he taught only orally, following the ancient custom of the sages of the Mysteries as well as of his teacher Saccas, in which the secret knowledge is given only to those proved to be trusted seekers of Truth.

However, as he became more famous, he was persuaded to put his ideas and lessons into writing. It was at this time, 263 CE, that a student by the name of Porphyry came to him from Greece. It was Porphyry who began the task of putting the writings into a systematic order. He arranged fifty-four discourses of Plotinus into six groups of nine and, because of this, the entire work is known as the Enneads. Porphyry also added a short biography of Plotinus to the collection of writings.

During these later years of his life in Rome, we see a brief glimpse into his personal character when we learn that his house was often filled with orphan children left in his care by wealthy guardians for short periods of time.

In the unsettled capital of the collapsing Roman Empire, the house and school of Plotinus became an island of refuge and peaceful inspiration to many of the nobility who realized that the days of Rome’s greatness were over.

So effective was the personal charm of Plotinus in his relationship with his guests that, in the course of time, he even gained the favor of Emperor Gallienus. Plotinus took advantage of this good fortune to request the aid of the Emperor in the fulfilling of a personal dream. He desired permission to rebuild a ruined town in Campania and make it into a Utopia which he proposed to name Platonopolis in honor of the famous Greek philosopher. It would be a city ruled by philosophic ideas of humanity’s inherent

It was probably an introduction to the teachings of Buddha given to him by Saccas that made Plotinus determine to learn more of Indian and also Persian religions

goodness and its true relationship with the Absolute One.

This idealistic venture failed to materialize evidently because of either court jealousy and intrigue or perhaps simply a change of heart on the part of the Emperor.

In the year 270 CE, Plotinus became seriously ill of a throat infection which, in the opinion of one biographer, was a form of leprosy. He left Rome and took a house in Campania where he died at the age of sixty-five.

Gaining Wisdom

It would, of course, be impossible to explain in the length of this article the substance of the philosophy of Plotinus. He went far beyond the intellectualism of the old Greek schools and into a vibrant, mystical division of consciousness as being sleep, dream, ecstasy that he claimed to be the only way of reaching an understanding and union with the Divine which he termed the One, or Good. The wisdom of this Supreme One, he stated, would never be reached by humanity through any process of sole reason.

It is apparent that the realization described by Plotinus is very similar to that found in both Buddhism and Hinduism. This is revealed in such phrases as “immersed in the Divine” and “One preserves nothing of one’s I.”

Porphry tells us that this state of being in union with the One happened to Plotinus on four occasions and during the period in which he taught in the school at Rome. Another source states that Plotinus had three of these experiences before Porphyry became his student, so this would make a total of seven times that he entered into Cosmic Consciousness.

These psychic revelations in a state of ecstasy, which was apparently a condition similar to Nirvana, clearly indicate that Plotinus was an Initiate and versed in the occult mysteries, taught to him no doubt by Ammonius Saccas.

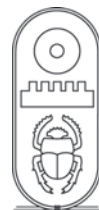
It cannot be expected that the person unfamiliar with such things as the Cosmic will understand much of these highly mystical revelations. While they may seem illogical to skeptics, they are in reality superlogical. The Hindu statement, “That art thou,” (*Tat twam asi*) is one of the most profound truths ever discovered by humanity; yet to the uninitiated it holds no meaning whatsoever and even appears absurd. Much of the writings of Plotinus suffer this same misunderstanding due to their high logic and occult meaning.

The wisdom of this Supreme One, he stated, would never be reached by humanity through any process of sole reason

One of the tenets of his philosophy was that the person who sees, “is itself the thing, which is seen.” The great German mystic-priest of the Dominican Order, Meister Eckhart, said the same thing in his words, “The knower and the known are one.”

The well-known Russian philosopher, Ouspensky, explains the above words of Plotinus by stating that he meant the faculty of seeing is related to, and a form of, consciousness. Ouspensky then mentions the Hindu divisions of consciousness as being sleep, dream, waking, and *turiya*, or Samadi. This last condition is what Plotinus calls a form of ecstasy which is the highest attainable by humans.

In the *Letters to Flaccus*, Plotinus claims that “external objects present us only with appearances.” Therefore, he states, we would be more accurate in saying that we have only an opinion of them and not a knowledge. The truth, to him, cannot be found in anything external as it is within us. The words of Christ are brought to mind, “the



kingdom of God is within you.” All of the ideas of which the world is made up are, in the theory of Plotinus, within our own thinking. Therefore the action necessary to reach truth is an “agreement of the mind with itself.”

Let us now return to our question: Why did his name fade into obscurity?

First it must be understood that while Plotinus was the last of the pagan Greek philosophers, he was also, although this fact is unrecognized, the first of the great religious mystics of the Christian Church.

His mystical ideas were absorbed into the Christianized Western world by two men in particular, Augustine and Dionysius in the fourth century. In his book *The City of God*, Augustine plainly reveals the powerful influence Plotinus had over his

thinking when he repeatedly uses his ideas in describing the spiritual aspects of the Divine.

In the opinion of one biographer, the personal testimony of Plotinus in regard to the truth of his mystic revelations and the beauty of the world of spirit was, of course, no longer available after his death, and his “ideal world no longer was attainable by others but became something visionary and dreamlike.” Another writer states that, through the “spiritual intermediary” of Augustine, the ideas of Plotinus have endured in Christianity down to the present day.

Thus it came about that, in an ironic twist of history, the thoughts of a great person who lived back in the third century have endured even to the present, while the name of the person himself is long lost in obscurity.



Plotinus (204 – 270 CE).

THE GREAT LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

Bill Anderson, FRC

In this article, Bill Anderson, FRC, presents the Great Library of Alexandria. During ancient times and today, the Library of Alexandria serves as “a center of excellence in the production and dissemination of knowledge and a place of dialogue, learning, and understanding between cultures and peoples” (the mission statement of the modern *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*).¹



Ancient Alexandria was the epitome of culture, elegance, and learning in the Mediterranean and European worlds for centuries; and the resonance of its intellectual might survives to present times. To the Romans it was *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*; Alexandria “near” not “in” Egypt. To them it was a bridge between mystical Egypt and the more pragmatic West.

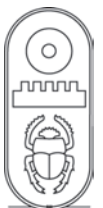
In the fifth century BCE, the Golden Age of Classical Greece, book collecting was still very uncommon. As the fourth century went on, private scroll collections and libraries became more numerous. Works on a wide variety of subjects were collected, including drama and poetry. However, the first recorded public library wasn't until about the time of Alexander the Great. The philosopher Aristotle, a man of great learning, who was also Alexander's tutor, had amassed a large personal library encompassing all the arts and sciences of his age. Legend has it that when the Ptolemies constructed the Great Library at Alexandria, it was arranged according to Aristotle's model of his own personal library.

In 332 BCE, after defeating the Persian army at the battle of Issus, Alexander the Great turned south towards Egypt, where he was acknowledged as pharaoh. His cousin Ptolemy was with Alexander when he traveled to the oasis of Siwa in the Western Desert, to confer with the oracle of the god Amun, “the Hidden One.” This proved to be a life-changing moment for Alexander. Prior to the epiphany at Siwa, he was just a successful Greek general; after it, he acquired the vision of a universal empire of equals, a very un-Greek thought, as every petty city-state of the time was divided into citizens, non-citizens, and slaves. Alexander's vision was responsible for the creation of this marvelous city on the northwest coast of the Egyptian delta.

Alexandria was founded in 331 BCE and Alexander wanted his city to become a *megalopolis*, one of the great cities of the world. He took Aristotle's plans for an ideal city and put them into practice. Its walls were over 10 miles in circumference. Its streets were of exceptional width, 100 feet in the case of the two main streets, and 50 feet for the rest. This far exceeded anything that had been seen before. The rectangular grid of streets was designed to allow sea breezes to blow through the city. From the date of its foundation, Alexandria became the seat of government in Egypt, a situation that lasted for nearly 1,000 years until the Arab conquest in 640 CE.

Foundation of the Museum

After Alexander's death in the city of Babylon, his cousin Ptolemy hijacked the



body, which was on its way back to Greece, and diverted it to Alexandria, where he housed it in the showpiece building known as the *Soma*. Ptolemy ascended to the throne of the pharaohs as Ptolemy I Soter, the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty. With his complex Mediterranean policy, there were good reasons why Ptolemy chose Alexandria as his capital, rather than the more traditional capital of Memphis.

In the context of the new Hellenistic world, Alexandria, as a port city, looked outwards to the world. Ptolemy felt that his new capital needed its own spiritual center of learning, as a counterweight to ancient Egyptian science and culture, and to that other Greek center of learning, Athens. To fulfill this need, he established the Museum (*Mouseion* in Greek) within the *Basileia* or royal precinct of the city, on the eastern side of Alexandria. In the *Brucheion* quarter of the city, it was a collection of palaces and parks like the Forbidden City in Beijing or the Kremlin in Moscow.

The Mouseion, a great complex of buildings, was erected on land adjacent to the royal palace and between it and the Mausoleum of Alexander in the *Soma*. It was designed to be a shrine of the Muses, the Greek goddesses of literature and the

arts. Strabo, the celebrated ancient traveler at the beginning of the Common Era, who lived from 64 BCE to 25 CE studied in Alexandria for a long time. In his *Geography* (Book 17) he mentions the Mouseion as a part of the royal palaces. It had a public walk, three porticoes around an exedra with seats where philosophers, rhetoricians, and others would go to listen to lectures and discussions.

Outside the large main building there were sleeping quarters and a refectory. The scholars held all property in common. The entire complex was richly endowed and contained lecture rooms, laboratories, a zoological, and a botanical garden. They started a project to classify the world's flora and fauna, following the example of Aristotle. Efforts were made to acclimatize plants from other parts of the world with the intention of growing them commercially. As a center for teaching and research, it became the first scholarly academy in the western sense of the word. In 297 BCE Demetrios of Phaleron, the ex-Athenian statesperson, peripatetic philosopher, legal scholar, and rhetorician, who had been driven out of Athens during the civil wars after the death of Alexander, arrived in Alexandria and was cordially received by Ptolemy I, who promoted him to royal councilor for cultural



Ancient Alexandria. Braun & Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (ca.1573).

affairs. Together they conceived of a place that would bring together all the learning of the world.

The culturally receptive environment cultivated by Ptolemy I, who was a historian himself, drew scholars, writers, and philosophers to his court from all over the Greek world. In the realm of cultural history, the greatest contribution of the Ptolemaic rulers was the establishment and development of Alexandria as an intellectual center. More importantly, the literary and intellectual heritage of ancient Greece was collected and edited in the Mouseion and ultimately prepared for transmission to posterity. The Hellenistic rulers realized that if they were to rule all their new subjects, they must understand them; and to understand them, they must collect their scrolls and have them translated into Greek. Knowledge was power, and they wanted the knowledge of the world under their control. The Ptolemies, who were the rivals of the Attalid Dynasty of Pergamon, forbade the export of papyrus. Egypt was the habitat, par excellence, of the papyrus plant. This ensured its rulers a monopoly on the world's prime writing material. But it was in vain, as the Attalids invented a new writing material called *parchment*.

Ancient Egypt had always had libraries, attached to the main temples, and available only to the clergy. This was perhaps not as exclusive as it may at first appear, since many people took a turn at being a clergy person in a temple for three months at a time. But the books were not available to the public in general. The temple records and books were however made available, so it has been related, to the members of the Mystery Schools attached to the main temples in Memphis, Thebes, and particularly in Heliopolis, today a suburb of Cairo.

The Great Library

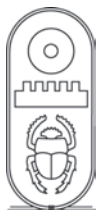
Members of the Mouseion were paid by the treasury and had to dedicate

themselves primarily to scholarship, but also to education. Apart from research into all the sciences, they also studied literature and philology. It was Ptolemy II Philadelphos who was mainly responsible for Alexandria's library collection.

The Mouseion was a crucible where the ideas of Hellenic civilization interacted with the mathematical and astronomical knowledge of ancient Egyptian civilization, jealously preserved over the millennia by the Egyptian clergy, but which the Greeks held in high regard. Alexandria and the Mouseion were responsible for a whole series of discoveries, some of which were lost in the following centuries.

The library was not open to the public. It was reserved only for the scholars attached to the Mouseion (like a modern research institute). The very first problem that the Ptolemies faced was acquisitions. Egypt boasted a long and distinguished history and there were many scrolls in the Egyptian language scattered throughout the land. They could buy Greek scrolls in "book markets" in Athens, Rhodes, and other centers of Greek culture. But the Ptolemies had wealth and single-minded determination. They sent agents out with well-filled purses and orders to buy whatever scrolls they could on every kind of subject—the older the copy the better. Older books were preferred because they were likely to have suffered less recopying and were less likely to have errors. Their agents did this so energetically that they spawned a new industry, the forging of old copies. The Ptolemies also confiscated books found on ships that docked at Alexandria. The owners were given copies while the originals went to the Great Library.

Special attention was paid to the classics of Greek literature. They collected together copies of Homer from every part of the Greek world in order to compile a definitive version. Thus they established a standard text for the most cherished books in Greek literature.



Newly acquired books were stacked in warehouses while they went through a preliminary procedure. Rolls usually had a tab attached to one end bearing the author's name and ethnicity.

The ethnicity was essential because the Greeks had only one name and different people often had the same name. Some rolls were also marked with their provenance. The policy was to acquire everything from exalted epic poetry to cookbooks. The Ptolemies aimed to make the collection not only a comprehensive repository of Greek writings, but also a tool for research.

They also included translations in Greek of important works in other languages. Large numbers of Jews had been encouraged to come to Alexandria. They became thoroughly Hellenized and spoke only Greek, and could no longer understand the original Hebrew or Aramaic, so Ptolemy II gave seventy rabbis the task of translating the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint. This first Greek version of the Hebrew Bible was completed around 130 BCE. Rolls of papyrus were collected in every tongue: Hebrew, Aramaic, Nabataean, Arabic, Indian, and ancient Egyptian. All were translated into Greek. The translations of the Persian writings attributed to Zoroaster alone came to over two million lines of verse. They also translated the Egyptian History of the famous priest Manetho, who worked at Heliopolis, and from which we obtained the list of dynasties we use today. It must have seemed as if the Ptolemies aimed to collect every book in the world.

The Daughter Library

To complement the Great Library, Ptolemy III Euergetes had a second library built in the newly erected *Serapeion*, the

temple of the deities Serapis, Isis, and their son Harpocrates that stood on one of the few hills in the city. A flight of one hundred steps led up to this "daughter library," so called because it contained copies of works held in the Great Library.

It was a temple library very much like the library of Pergamon, which was located in the precinct of the temple of Athena Polias, and it reflected the long-standing tradition of temple libraries in Egypt.

We know almost nothing about the physical arrangements. The main library likely consisted of a colonnade with rooms behind. The rooms would serve for shelving the rolls and the colonnade provided space for readers. It is estimated that there were 490,000 rolls in the main library and 42,800 in the daughter library. But many rolls held more than one work. At the head of the library was the Director appointed by the court, an intellectual luminary who often served as tutor to the royal children.

Who Was Who?

The Director, or Priest of the Muses, which was a very influential position, was appointed by the Ptolemaic rulers, then by the Roman emperors.

The first Director of the Great Library was Zenodotos of Ephesus. His successor was Apollonius of Rhodes, who composed the famous epic the *Argonautica* and was the tutor of Ptolemy III. Being raised in this intellectual environment ensured that the kings made efforts to seek out talented minds from all over the Greek world and invite them to Alexandria.

Zenodotus's first step was the classification system according to the nature of their contents: verse or prose, literary or scientific. The next step was to assign rooms or part of rooms to the various categories

It is estimated that there were 490,000 rolls in the main library and 42,800 in the daughter library.

of writings. The works were then arranged in alphabetical order by author on the shelves. This brings us to one of the great contributions that we owe to the scholars of the library of Alexandria: alphabetical order as a means of organization. Zenodotus was also the first to compile a glossary of rare words. He needed staff as well: sorters, checkers, clerks, pages, copyists, and repairers—and it is likely that a great many of them were slaves.

It was Callimachus of Cyrene, a towering figure in the history of the library and in the field of scholarship, who rose to become one of the most influential figures of intellectual life in Alexandria. During the reign of Ptolemy II, he compiled an index of books listing all the titles in the Great Library. However, his greatest achievement was entitled *Tables of Persons in Every Branch of Learning, together with a List of Their Writings* or just *Pinakes*, meaning “Tables.” It was a detailed bibliographical survey of all Greek writings, occupying over 120 books. He made the initial basic division into poetry and prose, and broke down each into subdivisions. For poetry there was a table of dramatic poets, with a breakdown into writers of tragedy and another of writers of comedy; a table of epic poets; one of lyric poets; for prose there was a table of philosophers, of orators, historians, writers on medicine, and even a miscellaneous table. Each table contained a list of authors with a brief biographical sketch, father’s name, birthplace, and also a nickname if they had one.

And so, a vital reference tool was created.

The universal scholar Eratosthenes of Cyrene came from Athens and became Director of the library (245–205 BCE) after Apollonius of Rhodes. He was also the tutor of Ptolemy IV Philopator. Skilled

in astronomy and geography, he calculated the circumference of Earth. He was also a historian and poet.

Aristophanes of Byzantium was Director from 205–185 BCE, and Aristarchus of Samos from 175–145 BCE. He calculated the distance from Earth to the Moon and became famous for postulating a heliocentric system where Earth and planets went round the Sun, 1,500 years before Copernicus. Together they brought the focus back to literature and language, and made this half-century a golden age for research in those fields.

Many other great minds came to Alexandria. The first physician to come was Praxagoras of Kos, who brought the Hippocratic tradition to Alexandria. His student, Herophilos of Chalkedon, was one of the most important doctors in Alexandria. He made dissection a regular practice and accomplished groundbreaking work in medical terminology. He deduced that the brain, not the heart, was the seat of intelligence, and isolated both the nervous systems and the arterial system.

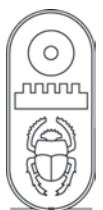
Euclid, the famous mathematician and geometer, came from the Platonic Academy in Athens to teach in Alexandria. Archimedes of Syracuse spent some time at Alexandria, as did Konon of Samos who is credited with the theory of conic sections. Apollonius of Perge, another great mathematician and geometer also spent time here.

In the first century CE, Heron of Alexandria published various works such as the *Pneumatica*,

where he explained how to boil water and channel steam into a pipe, long before James Watt. The *Dioptra* described the principles of magnifying lenses. In the *Hydraulica* he demonstrated the mechanism of a hydraulic lifting device. In the *Mechanics*, he discussed



Eratosthenes of Cyrene.



the number of pulleys needed to lift a weight of so many tons to a given height.

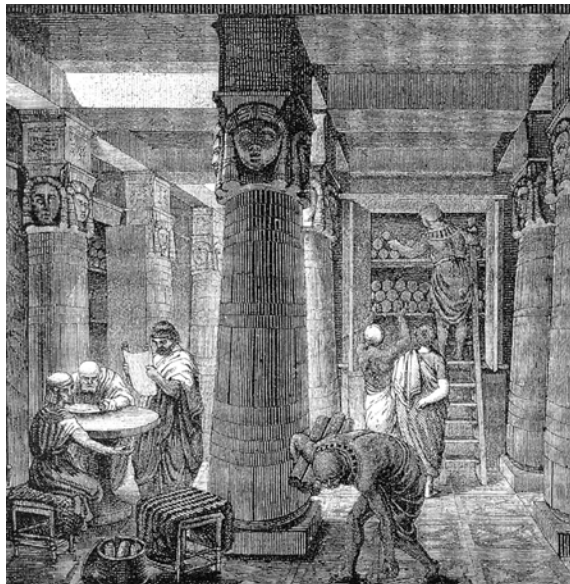
An End and a Beginning

The date of the library's destruction has long been a matter of debate. Was it when Julius Caesar set fire to the warehouses during the civil war in Egypt? Or perhaps it happened during the civil disturbances in the second half of the third century under the Emperor Aurelian (270-275)? Or perhaps it was during the religious disturbances in the fifth century, when the Serapeion library was destroyed by Christian fanatics? Or was it when the Arabs conquered the city in 640? There is no clear answer, though present scholarship suggests that most of the library was destroyed or dispersed in 272 CE during the civil war, when the Brucheion quarter of the city was destroyed by Aurelian.

The library was the first and greatest of its kind in ancient times. It was

comprehensive, collected books from all over the known world, and it was public, in the sense that it was open to anyone with scholarly or literary qualifications. It was the ancient version of a think tank.

In 1974 it was decided to build a new library in the city, the *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*. With UNESCO backing, the work of creating the new library was started in 1988 and the complex was officially inaugurated in 2002. This new building, with its highly original design, occupies part of the Ancient Palaces section of the city, not far, it is thought, from where the original Great Library actually stood. It is a circular structure, evoking the rising Sun. Throughout the day, sunlight highlights incised letters in scripts from all over the world. Inside, there is a single vast reading room with six hundred columns evoking the papyriform columns of ancient Egyptian temples.



The Ancient Library of Alexandria.

THE MODERN BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA



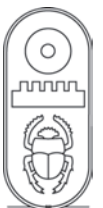
Today's Library of Alexandria features inscriptions set in a dynamic work of architecture, a building that seems in motion rising toward the Sun as if in orbit.



The collection of the modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina includes: the *Rose+Croix Code of Life* (translated into 24 languages); *So Mote It Be* by Emperor Christian Bernard; *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* by Frater Christian Rebisse; *Master of the Rose Cross: A Collection of Essays By and About Harvey Spencer Lewis*; *Treasures of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum: A Catalogue*; *Spiritual Laws that Govern Humanity and the Universe* by Frater Lonnie Edwards, M.D., and other Rosicrucian titles.

ENDNOTES

¹Bibliotheca Alexandrina, The New Library of Alexandria, "Mission Statement," http://www.bibalex.org/aboutus/mission_en.aspx.



HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA

Valerie Dupont, SRC

In her book, *Feminin Actif, Feminin Solaire (Active Feminine, Solar Feminine)* Valerie Dupont, SRC, author and RCUI instructor for the French Grand Lodge, presents a brief biography of one of the most extraordinary women in history, the great Neoplatonist, Hypatia of Alexandria.



Hypatia (370 – 410 CE) was the daughter of the great Theon Alexandricus, who was one of the most eminent scholars of his time—a renowned mathematician and geometrician. According to some of her father’s contemporaries, Hypatia who was taught by her father, surpassed him in mathematics by supporting and continuing his work. She also did extensive research in astronomy.

Even more, she did not settle for just these scientific studies, but very early on became interested in Neoplatonic mysticism, developed by Plotinus a century before. She was a disciple of Ammonios and so surpassed the thinkers of her time (and according to various accounts, even some of those who preceded her) in knowledge and wisdom that she obtained a chair in mathematics and philosophy at the Platonic school of Alexandria. There, she developed the ideas of her predecessors—Plotinus and Iamblichus—but by giving them a scientific and methodical dimension, she immediately earned a great reputation. Her courses had an unprecedented success.

For many, she is the true founder of the famous school of Alexandria, the most reputable institution of her time, which would have, because of its solid foundation



Ancient Faiyum portrait of Hypatia.

and the quality of its teaching, a great future for many centuries.

Hypatia’s disciples were numerous and enthusiastic. She instructed them in all the sciences, attracting many students not only because of her knowledge and the depth of her reflections, but also because of her exceptionally radiant personality. Very beautiful, she was known for a great purity in morality and an impressive authority, nevertheless mixed with modesty.

None of her writings remain; only a few titles of her great treatises and works. However, as with Pythagoras, we can capture some aspects of her character thanks to the accounts of those around her. In particular the letters of Synesius of Cyrene (her disciple, although they were the same age) are full of respect and affection for her.

However, Synesius was not easy to impress. We know that he was a man with renowned authority, who was not afraid to lecture the emperor on morality, and who was given the military organization of the borders, and we suspect that he was not enthusiastic about everyone. When in 410, even though he was not religious, he was offered a position as bishop (the most important social function of the time), he laid out his conditions: he wanted to remain married and not to renounce the doctrines of the pre-existence of the soul and the eternity of the world that he had learned from Hypatia, which were contrary to Christian dogmas.

In regards to these various elements, we can truly consider Synesius as a credible witness about Hypatia, and we can believe without any reservation the opinion he had of her. In one letter, he called her his mother, his daughter, his doctor, his benefactor, while saying that she deserved even more respectable titles, if any existed. Elsewhere, he wrote: "If it is true that the deceased lose the memories of one another, I will still preserve the memory of Hypatia, for whom I had so much friendship."

This is to say that he admitted having been intensely marked by the personality of this initiate, and in such a profound manner that her influence could surpass the limits of an incarnation, like something learned by the soul and transcending the cerebral plane.

In his other letters, he always referred to her as a philosopher, a word that at the

time had a much deeper significance than today: the philosopher was not in fact a simple intellectual or student; but a master renowned for wisdom and knowledge, and very few had a right to this title.

Synesius also tells us that Hypatia's abilities surpassed the framework of speculative knowledge. In fact one day he asked her in a letter to build a hydroscope (used to determine the purity of water) for him. In another letter he asked for an astrolabe, a sort of planisphere. These details prove that the talents of this uncommon woman applied at many levels, both in theories and pedagogy, technically and for scientific accomplishments. All of this presents before our wondering spirit the image of a sort of feminine Aristotle (for the longevity of the school she founded, but not for the contents of the theses, hers were much more mystical than Aristotle's), a Leonardo da Vinci before his time...

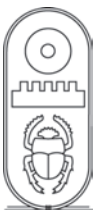
She therefore enjoyed widespread admiration and respect from all, pagans and Christians. There is no doubt that she exerted some political influence, which soon attracted the jealousy of a small group of mediocre spirits. Her end was very sad. A dissension arose between the archbishop

Cyril of Alexandria and the prefect of this city, who was Hypatia's friend. Hypatia was blamed for the dissension. One day a small group of fanatical Christians followed her while she was strolling and abducted her. She

was brought to a church, beaten to death, flayed, and burned.

Among the other women Platonists of this time, we can mention those who alas are no more. Only names without a face: Gemina, mother and daughter (disciples of Plotinus), Amphiclea (Iamblichus's daughter-in-law), or at a more remote time, Arria (to whom Diogenes Laertius dedicated his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*,

For many, she is the true founder of the famous school of Alexandria, the most reputable institution of her time



a reference work of the first order)... These women, often cited by the authors of their time, were probably all remarkable. However, lacking more precise elements, we must only imagine what they must have been like. Their existence allows us, however, to affirm that women played an important part in philosophy.

Thus, we realize, by searching persistently, that in antiquity many women distinguished themselves by their wisdom and brilliant culture. In actuality, they were no doubt more numerous than the few personalities mentioned here, but the sample is sufficient to understand their positive action.

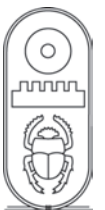
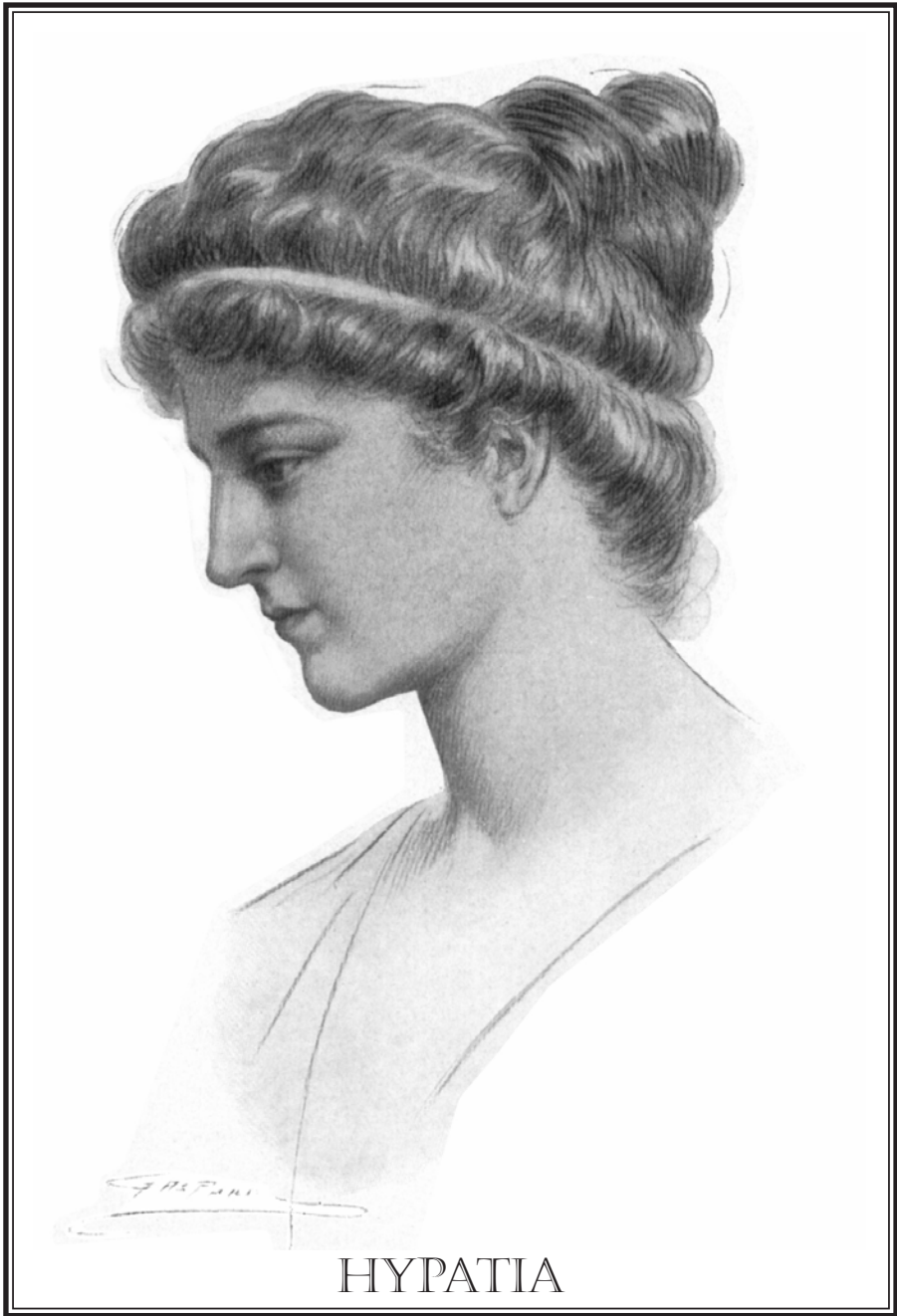
We can see that some of them truly enlightened their era, such as supernovas in often darkened skies. To this effect, Ahmose-Nefertari, Theano, Sappho, Ban Zhao, and Hypatia, figure among humanity's most eminent representatives.

With Hypatia, we can even say that we have met the Exception: there are, in fact, few beings, men or women, who have manifested so much intelligence, so much inventive genius, knowledge, and at the same time, such a degree of nobility. This is why she remains no doubt unequalled in her perfection.

Yet, which history books even mention her?

There was a woman at Alexandria named Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher Theon, who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time. Having succeeded to the school of Plato and Plotinus, she explained the principles of philosophy to her auditors, many of whom came from a distance to receive her instructions. On account of the self-possession and ease of manner, which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not infrequently appeared in public in the presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in going to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more.

—By Socrates Scholasticus, from *Historia Ecclesiastica* (written ca. 439 CE)



AVICENNA

Connie James, SRC

Many people think that Neoplatonism flourished only in the Roman Empire around the third and fourth centuries CE. However, it re-emerged again in the Islamic lands in later centuries. In this article, Connie James, SRC, presents the story of a great Muslim, pantheist, Neoplatonic philosopher, and mystic who influenced Western thought for hundreds of years.



A thousand years ago the Muslim world had reached a high degree of civilization with a rich and diverse culture, great centers of learning, a developed commerce, and a high standard of living. Muslim civilization exhibited a vitality and energy unmatched in backward Europe. In fact, the Muslim world, with its roots in what was left of Classical civilization, acted as a cultural bridge between the great civilizations of the past and the later European Renaissance. Knowledge, which might have been lost, was preserved and elaborated upon. Building on what the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had earlier synthesized, Muslim thinkers made much progress in science, particularly in mathematics, astronomy, alchemy, chemistry, physics, and medicine. Many great minds emerged as guiding lights of this civilization. The one who is best known in the West is the Persian physician and philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (980 – 1037).

Abu Ali al-Hussain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina was born in 980 at Afshaneh, a village

near Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan. His father was a member of the Ismaili sect and came from the city of Balkh. The Ismailis have esoteric doctrines, which developed under the influence of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. Avicenna was educated in Bukhara, at that time the capital of the Persian Samanid dynasty, the first native dynasty to arise in Iran after the Arab conquest, and who were responsible for a new Persian renaissance. Bukhara was a trading, scientific and cultural center; one of the most ancient cities in Central Asia, once conquered by Alexander the Great, when it was a part of the Persian province of Sogdia. The name of the city is said to be derived either from the Buddhist word “vihara” meaning “monastery” or from a Zoroastrian word meaning “source of knowledge.” The Samanids controlled Transoxiana (north of the Oxus or Amu Darya river) and Khorâsân (south of the Oxus river). Bukhara and the nearby city of Samarkand were the cultural centers of the kingdom and lay on the fabled Silk Road from China to the Mediterranean. Bukhara was known as “the meeting place of the highest intellectuals of the age, the horizon of the literary stars of the world.” It attracted the greatest minds of the time. Although Persian was the spoken language of the region, it was around this time that the gradual turkicisation started in Transoxiana, whose countries remain mainly Turkic speaking to this day.

Raised among the intellectuals of Bukhara, Avicenna was exposed to philosophical and metaphysical ideas at an early age. His father’s house was a meeting

place for people of learning in the area. He amazed scholars who met at his father's house with his remarkable memory and ability to learn. Exceptionally bright, by the age of ten he had become well versed in the study of the Qur'an, poetry, and various sciences. Having mastered all branches of formal learning, including Euclid, law, and medicine, he became a physician at the age of sixteen. He also studied logic, philosophy, and metaphysics. In his autobiography, Avicenna stated that he was more or less self-taught, but that at crucial times in his life he received help. At seventeen Avicenna successfully treated the seriously ill ruler of Bukhara, the Shah Nuh ibn Mansur, when his own doctors had given up hope. His renown as a physician spread throughout the Muslim world. Refusing any monetary reward, Avicenna asked only to be allowed free use of the royal library, which contained many rare and unique books and was one of the most extensive collections of works on philosophy and science then extant. Avicenna studied avidly, devouring all the contents of the library. By twenty one, he had composed his first book, and within a few years was recognized as one of the most learned people in the world.

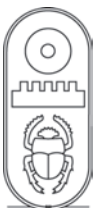
If the fortunes of the Samanids had taken a different turn, Avicenna's life might have been very different. The Shah had appointed Sebüktegin, a former Turkish slave as governor of Ghazni in present-day Afghanistan, and his son, Mahmud, was made governor of Khorâsân. However the Turkish tribes already in Transoxiana joined with the two governors in an attempt to overthrow the Shah. Bukhara was taken in 999, and it was during these turbulent times when the newer Turkish elements were replacing the Persian domination of Central Asia that Avicenna's father died. Without the support of his father or his patron, he travelled westward to Khiva, and then to avoid being kidnapped by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, he fled westward again

to Gurganj, the modern Köneürgenç in northern Turkmenistan, which was the sophisticated, cultured, and cosmopolitan capital of the Khorezmshahs. There, the state-sponsored Academy of Learning sparkled with the brilliance of such great minds as Avicenna and al-Biruni. By day he lectured on law, logic, and astronomy, while in the evening he gathered students around him for philosophical and scientific discussion.

Later he travelled south into Persia, to Rey, just south of Tehran, where he started a medical practice; and then later still, he moved further west to Hamadân. There he cured the ruling Buyid Amir of severe colic. For this he was made court physician and vizier. A mutiny among the army caused his dismissal and forced him to flee to Esfahân, disguised as a Sufi. But when the Amir's colic returned, he was summoned back; the Amir apologized to him and reinstated him. This was a very hectic time for Avicenna. By day, as vizier, he was concerned with the administration, while the nights were spent lecturing and dictating notes for his books. Students would gather at his home to read his books, especially his two greatest, the *Shifa* and the *Qanun*.

After the death of his patron in 1022, he went to Esfahân once again, only to return several years later to Hamadân, worn out by hard work. His friends advised him to slow down and take life in moderation, but this was not in his character and he died in 1037 at the age of fifty-seven. His mausoleum, with its twelve pillars, can still be seen in Hamadân.

Avicenna's writings on medicine and the sciences brought him fame in both the East and West. He wrote mainly in Arabic, though some of his works were in his native Persian. His most famous work, the *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* or "Canon of Medicine," is an immense encyclopedia of over one million words, based on the findings of the Greeks, Romans, and Arabs,





The opening decoration and invocation to Allah from Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, copied in 1597-8. From the Medical Historical Library at Yale University.

and containing all medical knowledge available at the time. The *Qanun* or "Canon" as it was called in the West, was translated into Latin in the twelfth century, and for several centuries thereafter, it was the medical authority in both East and West, having reputedly had a significant influence on the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci. It was divided into five books. The first deals with general principles; the second with some 760 drugs arranged alphabetically; the third with diseases of the organs and other parts of the body; the fourth with diseases such as fevers; and the fifth with compound

medicines. Due to its systematic approach, it superseded the works of Galen and remained supreme for six centuries. His important contributions included such advances as the recognition of the contagious nature of tuberculosis, the distribution of diseases by water and soil, the interaction between psychology and health, and a treatise on drugs. He was the first to describe meningitis and he made rich contributions to anatomy, gynecology, and child health. He pointed out the importance of diet, the importance of climate and environment on health, and the use of oral anesthetics. He noticed the

close relationship between emotions and the physical condition and felt that music had a definite physical and psychological effect on patients. Avicenna's early interest in medicine and science probably led to his interest in alchemy. Along with many learned people of his time, he considered alchemy to be of great importance. It was through his alchemical researches that he was able to produce many new compounds and medicines.

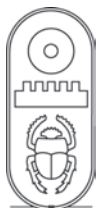
Avicenna is also remembered as a great philosopher. His early reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and the writings of other Greek thinkers led him to pursue philosophy with an intense interest and original thinking, though he acknowledged his debt to al-Fârâbi, the real founder of Islamic Neoplatonism, and his avowed spiritual master. His own philosophy combined elements of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, attempting to reconcile Greek and Islamic beliefs. Mystical, Hermetic, and Gnostic ideas are evident in some of his later writings. His *Kitab al-Shifa*, or "Book of Healing" is a vast scientific and philosophical work covering the natural sciences, mathematics based on Euclid's "Elements," astronomy, music, philosophy, metaphysics, and various other subjects. It is a compilation of the entire corpus of knowledge of the ancient world. In physics he studied the different forms of energy, heat and light, and the concepts of force, vacuum, and infinity. He made the observation that if the perception of light is due to the emission of some sort of particles by a luminous source, the speed of light must be finite. He proposed an interconnection between time and motion, and also commented upon gravity. Through careful observation he even deduced that the planet Venus must be closer to the Sun than Earth.

Avicenna completed most of his works, both major and minor, in Arabic. But in his native Persian, he wrote a large manual on philosophy entitled the *Danishnâme-ye Alai*.

One of his most celebrated Arabic poems describes the descent of the Soul into the body from the "Higher Sphere."

Among his major contributions to philosophy, and where he comes closest to Rosicrucian ontology, are his discussions on reason and reality. He claimed that the Divine is pure intellect and that knowledge consists of the mind grasping the intelligible. He discussed the difference between reality and actuality, and examined the concept of "existence," seeking to integrate all aspects of science and religion into a grand metaphysical vision. Using this vision he tried to explain the formation of the universe. He regarded the world as an emanation from the Divine, and what we see around us as a process of gradually evolving complexity which through time, has resulted in the world we see around us today. Writing about "Nous," or the "Active Intellect" as he termed it, he believed in the existence of the soul and that the human body was composed of both material and immaterial components. He wrote about the use of intuition and the nature of psychic events, and taught that the ultimate fate of the soul was to achieve "conjunction" with the Active Intellect or Nous, something akin perhaps to what we would today call "Cosmic Consciousness."

The modern world owes much to this Muslim scientist-philosopher and mystic. It has been said that his *Shifa* and *Qanun* mark the apex of medieval thought, and constitute one of the major syntheses in the history of the mind. As Rosicrucians, we acknowledge the great part he played in upholding and developing the tradition he traversed, one which has contributed greatly to our own teachings.



MARSILIO FICINO AND RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, D. Phil.

From pp. 33 – 40 of *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*, “Italian Renaissance Magic and Cabala” by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, ©2008. Reprinted with permission of Oxford University Press (www.oup.com).

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, (D. Phil., Oxon), is Professor of Western Esotericism and Director of the Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism (<http://centres.exeter.ac.uk/lexesesol/>), University of Exeter, UK. In this article, Professor Goodrick-Clarke introduces us to the Neoplatonism of Renaissance Florence and the eminent Neoplatonist, Marsilio Ficino, whose concepts continue to influence us today.



The Byzantine Legacy

The history of Western esotericism in the Middle Ages is largely one of exotic transmission. Following the sack of Rome in A.D. 410, the western part of the empire was engulfed by the mass migration of barbarian peoples, and the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium (Constantinople) became the principal channel of classical and Hellenistic civilization. Hellenism had not only assimilated Eastern ideas and religions, but also proved the most durable of all ancient cultures. By Arnold Toynbee's reckoning, the Hellenistic world passed through several eras including the Ptolemies, the Roman Empire, and the advent of Christianity.¹ While the Latin West entered the Dark Ages, Byzantium still basked in the sunny climes of the Greek East and inherited the mantle of the eternal city as the “second Rome.” Its pagan schools in Athens remained loyal to the Neoplatonists until the sixth century. As the major regional power across the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Near East, Byzantium carried the torch of

Alexandrian world culture for a millennium until the final onslaught of the Ottoman Turks from Central Asia in 1453.²

However, by the sixth century, the Arabs were an ascendant power on Byzantium's eastern flank, where they settled the Middle East and Egypt. Confronted by the ancient and mysterious cultures of Egypt and Chaldea, Arabian culture swiftly assimilated the esoteric sciences of astrology, alchemy, and magic, all based on ideas of correspondences between the divine, celestial, and earthly spheres. The Arabs were also fascinated by the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, and they produced their own Hermetic literature with revelations of theosophy, astrology, and alchemy. The most famous example, the *Emerald Tablet* (sixth to eighth century A.D.), introduced the motto “As above, so below,” which would become well known to the Western world after the fourteenth century.³

Michael Psellus, a Byzantine Platonist of the eleventh century, used the Hermetic and Orphic texts to explain the Scriptures. A notable number of medieval scholars including Theoderic of Chartres, Albertus Magnus, Alain of Lille, William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, Bernard of Treviso, and Hugh of Saint Victor also mentioned Hermes Trismegistus or quoted the *Asclepius*, the only Hermetic treatise known to medieval Europe.⁴ Although condemned by church authorities, astrology, alchemy, and ritual magic were all practiced in medieval Europe.⁵ Meanwhile, scholastic theology was increasingly divorced from natural philosophy. The growing interest in nature

and the sensible world, together with the foundation of the universities and secular study, created an intellectual space within which Platonism and the *Hermetica* could be received in the Latin West.

Geopolitical factors in the Mediterranean world and Near East played a vital part in this process of cultural transfer. As the ascendant Ottoman Turks succeeded the medieval Arab caliphates as the dominant regional power in the Middle East, they increasingly impinged on the old Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, which had been the major political and cultural force in southeastern Europe and Anatolia since the fall of Rome. As the Turks pressed on westward across the Greek islands and into the Balkans, the territory of Byzantium began to dwindle. The rich repository of Classical, Greek, and Arab learning, formerly the powerhouse of the Byzantine cultural sphere, also began to shift westward through the movement of refugee intellectuals, churchmen, libraries, manuscripts, and other treasures.⁶

This increased contact with the Greek world of the declining Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century brought with it a significant philosophical shift in the Latin West, which in turn produced a revised outlook on nature and the heavens and, ultimately, a new vision of man, science, and medicine. This shift in philosophy favored Plato over Aristotle, whose works had formed the mainstay of medieval thought and science following their introduction to the Arab world in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

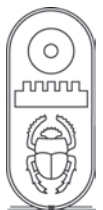
The Importance of Florence

The center of this revival of Platonism was Florence, the flourishing Renaissance city which lay in the Tuscan plain. Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of the republic from 1375 until his death in 1406, had played a major role in establishing humanism as the new cultural fashion, thereby boosting Florence's importance throughout

Italy. More especially, he recognized the importance of original Greek sources for a deeper understanding of Roman authors. In 1396, he persuaded the Florentine government to appoint Manuel Chrysoloras, the leading Byzantine classical scholar, to teach at the local university. The appointment created a nucleus of humanists who were able to pass on their skills to the next generation for the study and translation of ancient Greek literature.⁷

Thanks to Salutati's initiative, there were sufficient numbers of new Italian Hellenists to receive and articulate the next wave of Greek thought and letters that arrived in Florence from the Byzantine world. In 1438-1439, the Council of Ferrara—moved in midsession to Florence—was held to discuss the reunion of the Eastern Church with Rome. Leading figures in the Byzantine delegation were Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355–1452) and John Bessarion of Trebizond (1395–1472), the young patriarch of Nicaea. The elderly Plethon espoused a pagan Platonic philosophy that understood the ancient Greek gods as allegories of divine powers. Bessarion, who later became a cardinal, composed a defense of Plethon and Platonism against the Aristotelian George of Trebizond, who had attacked Plethon's ideas. The ensuing wave of philosophical disputes, together with their translation and discussion among the humanists of Florence, prepared the ground for a major efflorescence of Platonism in the second half of the century.⁸

Wealth and patronage also played an important part in the Platonist revival at Florence. Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), the leading merchant-prince of the Florentine republic, played a vital part in the Platonist revival. Building on the power and prestige of his father, Giovanni de' Medici (1360–1429), who realized an immense fortune through banking and trade, Cosimo effectively became the absolute ruler of Florence, while remaining a private citizen of a republic jealous of its liberty. But



Cosimo demonstrated royal generosity in his patronage of the arts and letters. In addition to his magnificent palace in the city, he built villas at Careggi, Fiesole, and elsewhere. His ecclesiastical foundations were numerous, including the basilica at Fiesole, the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, and a hospice in Jerusalem for pilgrims. In the world of fine art, he was the patron of Donatello, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and Luca della Robbia, whose paintings and sculptures gave full expression to the color and vibrancy of the Renaissance world.⁹

Greek philosophy and learning were especially dear to Cosimo's heart. During the Council of Florence, he frequently entertained Plethon and was deeply impressed by his exposition of Platonist philosophy. Later, after the final collapse of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, many learned Greek refugees from Constantinople found refuge in his palace. Thanks to Cosimo's interest in this Platonist stream of ideas from an exotic and waning world and his capacity for munificent patronage, both Platonism and the *Hermetica* were cultivated and promoted by a gifted circle of young idealists at Florence.¹⁰

Marsilio Ficino and the Hermetic Revival

Many Florentine thinkers had been attracted by Plethon's claims that all Greek philosophies could be harmonized and that a profound knowledge of Plato could become the basis of religious unity, the very subject under debate at the Council of Florence. But others were more receptive to ideas of a new spirituality. These seekers found in Platonism and the *Hermetica* an inspiration which promised far more than ecclesiastical concord. Prominent among these idealists was the young Florentine humanist called Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) who, under Cosimo's auspices, became the chief exponent of this revived Platonism and the high priest of the Hermetic secrets within a new Platonic Academy.¹¹

The son of a physician, Marsilio Ficino first studied philosophy as part of his own medical studies. The curriculum at the university was still dominated by scholasticism, and the young Ficino was repelled by the naturalism of Aristotle. Its dry statement of material facts could not slake his thirst for spiritual mystery, and its implicit denial of the immortality of the human soul struck at the very root of his search for divine inspiration. In Plato's idea of two coexisting worlds—a higher one of Being that is eternal, perfect, and incorruptible, a sharp contrast to the material world—Ficino found precisely what he had sought. The higher world of Ideas or Forms provided archetypal patterns of everything that existed on the lower mundane plane. The human soul originated in the higher world but is trapped in the body in the lower world, and Plato's writings sometimes describe the return or ascent of the soul to its true, perfect home.

The patron found the idealist. By 1456, Marsilio Ficino had begun to study Greek with a view to examining the original sources of Platonic philosophy, and he translated some texts into Latin. By 1462, Cosimo had given Ficino a villa in Careggi and commissioned him to translate a number of



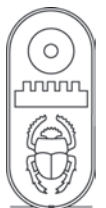


Giovanni di Stefano, floor intarsia showing Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and Marsilio Ficino (1488), west entrance, Siena Cathedral.

Greek manuscripts. But the new spirituality soon recruited Hermeticism alongside Platonism. Just as Ficino was preparing to translate numerous Platonic dialogues for his master, new Greek wonders arrived from the East. In 1460, a monk, Leonardo da Pistoia, arrived in Florence from Macedonia with a Greek manuscript. Cosimo employed many agents to collect exotic and rare manuscripts for him abroad, and this was one such delivery. However, this particular manuscript contained a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Gleaning something of its mystical cosmology, the elderly Cosimo was convinced that the *Hermetica* represented a very ancient source of divine revelation and wisdom. In 1463, Cosimo told Ficino to translate the *Hermetica* before continuing his

translation of Plato. Within a few months, Ficino had made a translation that Cosimo was able to read.¹²

Until as late as 1610, the works collected as the *Hermetica* were believed to date far back beyond their actual composition in the first two centuries A.D. Ficino and his successors regarded Hermes Trismegistus as a contemporary of Moses, and his teachings were seen as a *philosophia perennis*, a perennial philosophy predating yet anticipating Christianity with its roots in pharaonic Egypt. The diffusion of these ideas can readily be illustrated, even in the Church. Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503) had the Borgia apartments in the Vatican adorned with a fresco full of hermetic symbols and astrological signs. In the entrance to Siena



Cathedral, one can still see, in a work on the marble floor dating from 1488, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus as a bearded patriarch.¹³ Renaissance writers also regarded the Hermetic treatises as unique memorials of a *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) in the sense of the divine revelation granted to the oldest sages of mankind and handed down through a great chain of initiates. It was generally agreed that Hermes Trismegistus was a principal among these ancient sages together with Moses, Orpheus, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, and others in varying orders of descent.

After translating the *Hermetica*, Ficino resumed work on Plato, and Cosimo was able to read ten of Plato's dialogues before his death in 1464. Ficino completed his translation of the collected works of Plato, the first into any Western language, in 1469, and in the same year he wrote his famous commentary on Plato's *Symposium*.¹⁴ From 1469 to 1474, he worked on his own chief philosophical work, *Platonic Theology*.¹⁵ In late 1473, he became a Catholic priest, and he later held a number of ecclesiastical benefices, eventually becoming a canon of Florence Cathedral. About the same time he began to collect his letters, which give valuable insights into his life and activities over the next twenty years and include some smaller works of philosophy.¹⁶ After 1484, he devoted himself to his translation and commentary of Plotinus, the leading Neoplatonist of antiquity, which was published in 1492.

Although he lived a contemplative life as a scholar and priest, Ficino had a far-reaching influence on the world of Renaissance thought. Encouraged by Cosimo, he had already founded the new Platonic Academy at his villa in Careggi by 1463. Unlike a formal college, the Academy functioned chiefly as a loose circle of friends inspired by the spiritual ideas of Platonism and the *Hermetica*. Accounts of its activities indicate Ficino's desire to found a lay religious

community with discussions, orations, and private readings of Plato and other texts with younger disciples. Plato's birthday was celebrated with a banquet at which each participant made a philosophical speech. Public lectures on Plato and Plotinus were held in a nearby church. Humanists and other distinguished adherents from Italy and abroad frequented the Academy, and Ficino kept up an extensive correspondence with them.¹⁷

But what was Ficino actually teaching in the Academy? What was so novel and exciting about this newfound spirituality based on the new reception of Platonism and the *Hermetica*? The answers to these questions lie in Ficino's cosmology and the role in it that he assigned to the human soul. His model of the universe was derived from Neoplatonic and medieval sources, essentially a great hierarchy in which each being has its assigned place and degree of perfection. God was at the top of this hierarchy, which descended through the orders of angels, the planets, and the elements to the various species of animals, plants, and minerals.

This cosmology, itself the historical product of ancient and medieval speculation, had long remained essentially static. Within the hierarchy, each degree was merely distinct from the next by some gradation of attributes. Through his Platonic emphasis on the soul as the messenger between the two worlds, Ficino introduced a new dynamic into the traditional cosmology. He revived the Neoplatonic doctrine of the world soul to suggest that all the parts and degrees of the hierarchy were linked and held together by the active forces and affinities of an all-pervading spirit. In his scheme, astrology was intrinsic to a natural system of mutual influences between the planets and the human soul.¹⁸

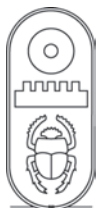
But prime of place was granted to the human soul in Ficino's cosmology. Ficino taught that thought had an influence upon its objects. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates identifies love as an active force that holds all

things together. Ficino attributed the active influence of thought and love to the human soul, which could reach out and embrace all things in the universe. This magical equivalence between each human soul and the world soul thus became the hallmark of Renaissance Neoplatonism. By placing the human soul, like a droplet of divinity, at the center of the universe, Ficino initiated a fundamental spiritual revolution in man's self-regard. Within his dynamic cosmology, the soul thus combined in itself everything, knew everything, and possessed the powers of everything in the universe.

This cosmology was not just a formal intellectual model but rather a map for the travels and ascent of one's own soul. In his emphasis on the inner, contemplative life, Ficino gave a personal and practical slant to his theory of the soul. Through meditation, Ficino believed, the soul exchanged its commerce with the mundane and material things of this outer world for a new contact with the spiritual aspects of the incorporeal and intelligible world of higher planes. Such spiritual knowledge is unobtainable as long as one's soul is enmeshed in ordinary experience and the noisy concerns of this

troubled world. In these lower states of consciousness, the soul is barely awakened. But once the attention is directed inward, the soul begins to ascend the spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos, all the while learning and interacting with higher spiritual entities.

Ficino always presented these mystical exercises and ascent experiences as journeys of the soul toward higher degrees of truth and being, culminating in the direct knowledge and vision of God. This initiatory aspect of Ficino's philosophy certainly helps to explain the intense attraction his ideas held for the Academy audiences. His listeners felt their souls were being invited to join in a cosmic voyage of spiritual exploration, an ascent toward the godhead, and a vision of universal truth. Ficino never doubted that his thought was Christian. For him, Jesus Christ was the exemplar of human spiritual fulfillment. His Christianity was, of course, a more esoteric, elite, spiritualized form of religion than that proffered to the credulous masses by the friars. Ficino saw himself as a physician of the soul, guiding his students on a path that could free them from the dross of this world and open their spirits to the dazzling radiance of divinity.¹⁹



END NOTES

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³Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Phanes Press, 1995), pp. 18-21.

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¹⁰James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), offers a definitive account of the Platonic revival in Florence and elsewhere in Italy.

¹¹A concise account of the life and thought of Ficino, together with an anthology of his works and a research bibliography is provided by Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, Western Esoteric Masters series (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2006). See also Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), Vol. 1, pp. 360-367; M. J. B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); M. J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹²Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 12-17.

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¹⁵Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, translated and edited by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001-2006).

¹⁶Ficino's letters are published in English as *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 6 vols. (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975-1990). See also *Meditations on the Soul: Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1997).

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¹⁸Ficino's Neoplatonic cosmology and philosophy of the soul and his reception of Hermetism is summarized in Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 8-21, and in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, pp. 42-48. A detailed account of his reading of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and *Asclepius* is found in F. A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp. 20-38.

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PLATONIC LOVE

Elisa Cuttjohn, SRC

One of the most influential aspects of Neoplatonism on Western culture was Marsilio Ficino's doctrine of Platonic love.¹ Richard Hooker, Ph.D. writes,

While Renaissance artists, thinkers, and other cultural producers only picked up Neoplatonism in part, the doctrine of Platonic love diffused quickly all throughout the culture. It significantly changed the European experience of sexual love which, since antiquity, had always been closely related to erotics and physical attraction. Suddenly writers, artists, poets, philosophers, and women's communities began discussing sexual love in terms of spiritual bonds, as reflecting the relationship between the individuals and God.²

Continuing to today, the concept of Platonic love is widely understood as:

1. love of the Idea of beauty, seen as terminating an evolution from the desire for an individual and the love of physical beauty to the love and contemplation of spiritual or ideal beauty.
2. an intimate companionship or relationship, especially between two persons of the opposite gender, that is characterized by the absence of sexual involvement; a spiritual affection.³

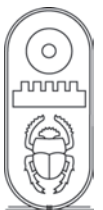
The origin of the concept of Platonic love comes from Plato's Symposium, a dialogue set in an all-night banquet where the partygoers decide to discuss the concept of Love (Eros). The conversation produces a series of reflections by the all-male participants on gender roles,

sex, and sublimation of basic human instincts. After the other speakers introduce their theories about love, Socrates then shares what he learned on this subject from a woman philosopher — Diotima of Mantinea, who initiated him not only into the mysteries of love when he was young; she also taught him about Wisdom, Beauty, and the Good. The "seer" Diotima, an Arcadian priestess, represents the "mystical element in Platonism, and her discourse is a blend of allegory, philosophy, and myth."⁴

As we progress in our lives, Diotima told Socrates, we grow in our conception of love. First we are stirred by the beauty of the young body. Then we begin to see the beauty in all bodies. At this point we look to the beauty of the soul. As man [a person] is able to identify the beauty in all souls, he soon appreciates the beauty in the laws, and the structure of all things. Lastly we discover the beauty of the forms, the divine ideas. Love is important for it starts and continues us on our path.⁵

James Lesher, Ph.D., writes that the story that Diotima told concerned:

nothing less than the means by which a mortal being can achieve union with a perfect, eternal, and divine being... For many later writers, especially those engaged in defining Christian doctrine during its formative period, Socrates' speech provided a framework for understanding a truth of the utmost importance—that love is not simply an aspect of human life but the means by which mortal beings can ascend from the physical realm to become united with God.⁶



Professor Lesher continues:

What seems to be the main conclusion is a view that Plato will consider important enough to return to again and again in other dialogues: the best and most fully appropriate object of human desire is *philosophia*, i.e. a life devoted to the contemplation of a set of eternal, perfect, and unchanging realities.⁷

Below are some excerpts from Socrates' tale of Love from Symposium. Plato does not mention Diotima again.



And now, taking my leave of you, I would rehearse a tale of love which I heard from Diotima of Mantinea, a woman wise in this and in many other kinds of knowledge, who in the days of old, when the Athenians offered sacrifice before the coming of the plague, delayed the disease ten years. She was my instructress in the art of love, and I shall repeat to you what she said to me...

After explaining to Socrates that Eros (Love) is a great spirit, an intermediate between the divine and the mortal, Diotima says:

“The truth of the matter is this: No deity is a philosopher or seeker after wisdom, for he is wise already; nor does any human who is wise seek after wisdom. Neither do the ignorant seek after Wisdom. For herein is the evil of ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he has no desire for that of which he feels no want.”

“But who then, Diotima,” I said, “are the lovers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the foolish?” “A child may answer that question,” she replied; “they are those who are in a mean between the two; Love [Eros] is one of them. For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is of the beautiful; and therefore

Love is also a philosopher: or lover of wisdom, and being a lover of wisdom is in a mean between the wise and the ignorant. And of this too his birth is the cause; for his [Eros's] father is wealthy and wise, and his mother poor and foolish. Such, my dear Socrates, is the nature of the spirit Love. The error in your conception of him was very natural, and as I imagine from what you say, has arisen out of a confusion of love and the beloved, which made you think that love was all beautiful. For the beloved is the truly beautiful, and delicate, and perfect, and blessed; but the principle of love is of another nature, and is such as I have described.”

I said, “O thou stranger woman, thou sayest well; but, assuming Love to be such as you say, what is the use of him to humans?” “That, Socrates,” she replied, “I will attempt to unfold: of his nature and birth I have already spoken; and you acknowledge that love is of the beautiful. But someone will say: Of the beautiful in what, Socrates and Diotima? – or rather let me put the question more dearly, and ask: When a person loves the beautiful, what does he desire?” I answered her “That the beautiful may be his.” “Still,” she said, “the answer suggests a further question: What is given by the possession of beauty?”

“To what you have asked,” I replied, “I have no answer ready.” “Then,” she said, “Let me put the word good in the place of the beautiful, and repeat the question once more: If he who loves good, what is it then that he loves? “The possession of the good,” I said. “And what does he gain who possesses the good?” “Happiness,” I replied; “there is less difficulty in answering that question.” “Yes,” she said, “the happy are made happy by the acquisition of good things. Nor is there any need to ask why a person desires happiness; the answer is already final.”

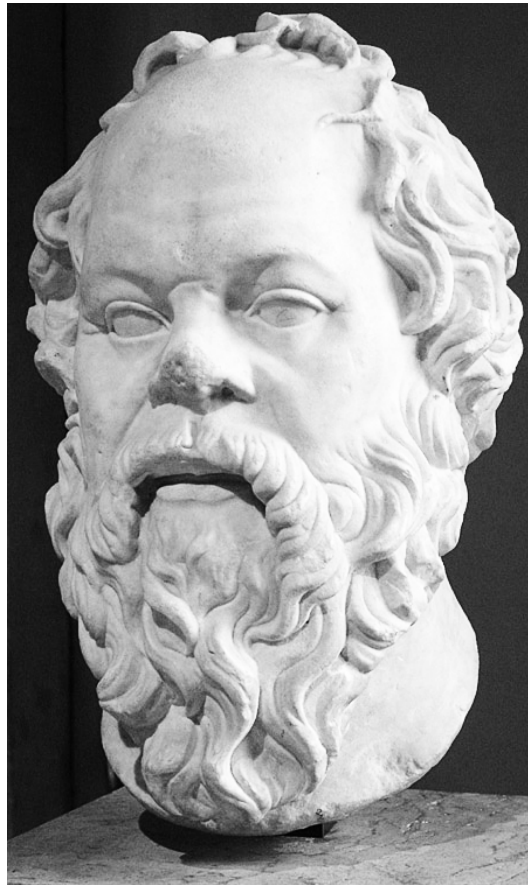
“You are right.” I said. “And is this wish and this desire common to all? and do all people always desire their own good, or only some people? – what say you?” “All people,” I replied; “the desire is common to all.” “Why, then,” she rejoined, “are not all people, Socrates, said to love, but only some of them? whereas you say that all people are always loving the same things.”

“I myself wonder,” I said, – “why this is.” “There is nothing to wonder at,” she replied; “the reason is that one part of love is separated off and receives the name of the whole, but the other parts have other names.”

Diotima and Socrates continue to discuss love, the good, and beauty. Diotima then says:

“Marvel not then at the love which all humans have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality.”

I was astonished at her words, and said: “Is this really true, O thou wise Diotima?” And she answered with all the authority of an accomplished sophist: “Of that, Socrates, you may be assured; think only of the ambition of humans, and you will wonder at the senselessness of their ways, unless you consider how they are stirred by the love of an immortality of fame. They are ready to run all risks greater far than they would have for their children, and to spend money and undergo any sort of toil, and even to die, for the sake of leaving behind them a name which shall be eternal. Do you imagine that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles to avenge Patroclus, or your own Codrus in order to preserve the kingdom for his sons, if they had not imagined that the memory of their virtues, which still survives among us, would be immortal? “Nay,” she said, “I am persuaded that all humans do all things, and the better they are the more they do them, in hope

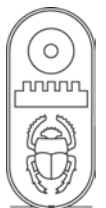


Socrates (469 – 399 BCE).

of the glorious fame of immortal virtue; for they desire the immortal.”

Diotima then offers that for most people, even the love of offspring serves mostly to preserve a person's memory, giving them the blessedness and immortality which they desire in the future.

“Who, when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones? Who would not emulate them in the creation of children such as theirs, which have preserved their memory and given them everlasting glory? Or who would not have such children as Lycurgus left behind him to be the saviors, not only of Lacedaemon, but of Hellas, as one may say? There is Solon, too, who is the revered father of Athenian laws; and many others there are in many other places, both among hellenes and barbarians, who have given to the world many noble works, and



have been the parents of virtue of every kind; and many temples have been raised in their honor for the sake of children such as theirs; which were never raised in honor of any one, for the sake of his mortal children.

“These are the lesser mysteries of love, into which even you, Socrates, may enter; to the greater and more hidden ones which are the crown of these, and to which, if you pursue them in a right spirit, they will lead, I know not whether you will be able to attain. But I will do my utmost to inform you, and do you follow if you can. For he who would proceed aright in this matter should begin in youth to visit beautiful forms; and first, if he be guided by his instructor aright, to love one such form only – out of that he should create fair thoughts; and soon he will of himself perceive that the beauty of one form is akin to the beauty of another; and then if beauty of form in general is his pursuit, how foolish would he be not to recognize that the beauty in every form is and the same! And when he perceives this he will abate his violent love of the one, which he will despise and deem a small thing, and will become a lover of all beautiful forms; in the next stage he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form.

“So that if a virtuous soul have but a little comeliness, he will be content to love and tend him, and will search out and bring to the birth thoughts which may improve the young, until he is compelled to contemplate and see the beauty of institutions and laws, and to understand that the beauty of them all is of one family, and that personal beauty is a trifle; and after laws and institutions he will go on to the sciences, that he may see their beauty, being not like a servant in love with the beauty of one youth or person or institution, himself a slave

mean and narrow-minded, but drawing towards and contemplating the vast sea of beauty, he will create many fair and noble thoughts and notions in boundless love of wisdom; until on that shore he grows and waxes strong, and at last the vision is revealed to him of a single science, which is the science of beauty everywhere. To this I will proceed; please to give me your very best attention:

“He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty (and this, Socrates, is the final cause of all our former toils) – a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or at another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example, in an animal, or in heaven or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things.

“He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from

fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.

“This, my dear Socrates,” said the stranger of Mantinea, “is that life above all others which people should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute...”

“...what if humans had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and dear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and

nourishing true virtue to become the friend of the Divine and be immortal, if mortal human may. Would that be an ignoble life?”

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Hooker, “Renaissance Neo-Platonism,” <http://hermetic.com/texts/neoplatonism.html>.

²Ibid.

³Random House Dictionary at Dictionary.com, “Platonic love,” (New York: Random House, 2012), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/platonic+love>.

⁴R.G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0090%3Atext%3Dintro%3Asection%3D4>.

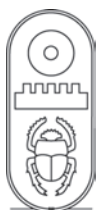
⁵Chris Marvin, “Diotima of Mantinea,” The Window, Philosophy on the Internet, <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/philo/phils/diotima.html>.

⁶James Leshner, “Later Views of the Socrates of Plato’s Symposium,” from M. Trapp, ed., *Socrates in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, (Ashgate: Centre for Hellenic Studies, 2007), p. 61.

⁷Ibid.



Diotima of Mantinea.



THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS

Raphael

The School of Athens was painted by the Italian Renaissance painter, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483–1520), better known simply as Raphael, when he was twenty-seven years old. Commissioned for Pope Julius II (1503–1513), this large fresco (5.77 x 8.14 meters, 16.5 x 25 feet) can still be viewed in the Room of

the Segnatura (the highest court of the Holy See) within the Vatican. The frescoes in this room mark the beginning of the high Renaissance.¹ Raphael is often associated with Renaissance Neoplatonism because of his skillful depictions of the ideal. Raphael died on his thirty-seventh birthday in 1520.



The School of Athens by Raphael. A legend for this painting, identifying the various figures, has never been found. We suggest the possibilities on the following page.



Socrates



Plato
(pointing upwards with *Timaeus* in his hand)



Aristotle
(holding *Ethics*)



Hypatia



Parmenides



Plotinus



Ptolemy
(holding the earthly sphere)



Heraclitus
(a portrait of the artist Michelangelo)



Zoroaster
(holding the heavenly sphere)



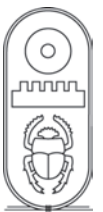
Pythagoras
(with Sacred Tetraktys)



Raphael
(Self Portrait)



Euclid
(teaching geometry to his pupils)



NATURE: A NEOPLATONIC TEXT

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the most revered figures in the history of American letters, was born in 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1836, Emerson co-founded the Transcendental Club and published his book-length essay "Nature," which is often considered a major milestone in the American Transcendentalist movement. This work would deeply influence Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David

Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, as well as millions of other readers.

Below is an excerpt from "Nature." This text is grounded in Platonism, especially Neoplatonism, as embodied in the writings of the Cambridge Neoplatonists.¹ Emerson also honored Plato with two essays in his book *Representative Men*: "Plato; or the Philosopher" and "Plato: New Readings."



Nature²

by Ralph Waldo Emerson

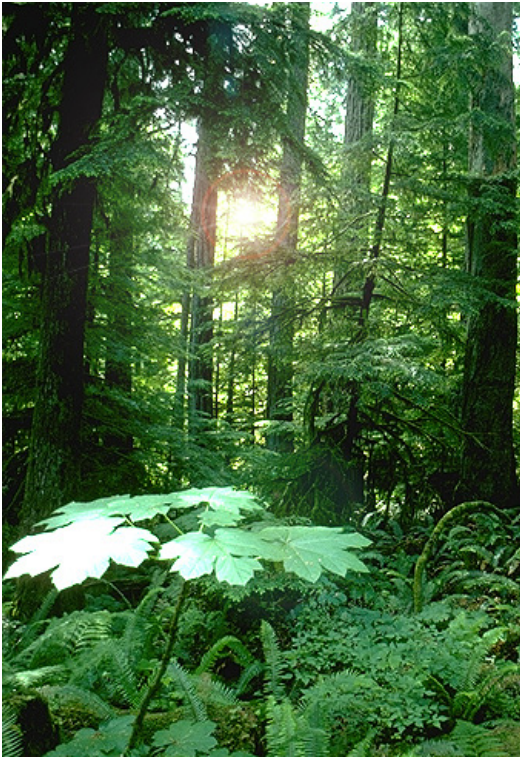
A subtle chain of countless rings
The next unto the farthest brings;
The eye reads omens where it goes,
And speaks all languages the rose;
And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form.

Introduction

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to

nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution



In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair.

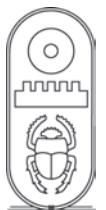
in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approach to an idea of creation. We are now so far from the road to truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous. But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable; as language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex.

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

Chapter I NATURE

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.



The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland

beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and

the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, — he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its

tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmiest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake

his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, —no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, —my head

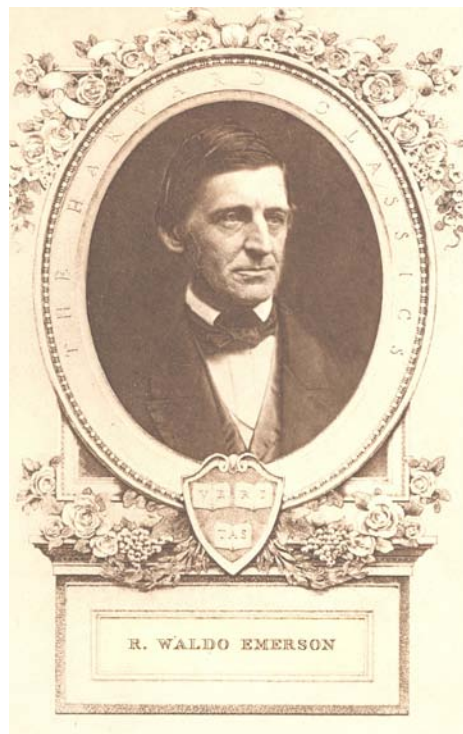
Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, —master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the

storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

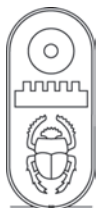
Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs, is overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.



ENDNOTES

¹Bryan Hileman, "Transcendental Forerunners," <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/roots/rootsintro.html>.

²Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836).



BEAUTY IN ART OR THE ART OF BEAUTY

Christian Bernard, FRC

In this article, Christian Bernard, Emperor of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, invites us to develop our perception of the transcendental nature of beauty, which can be a powerful tool to carry us closer to Divine Wisdom.



Beauty is closely linked to the arts and, as a result, to the areas the arts are connected with. Both emotion and reason must be our guides when we contemplate the artistic works that are accessible to us, so that we only choose those that elevate us in consciousness. Beauty is in every manifestation, to varying degrees. Music, painting, sculpture, dance, as well as nature and the things humankind does, can kindle the feeling of beauty. And we should become more attached to the perception of beauty than to the arts themselves. Indeed, while the aim of aesthetics is to engender the feeling of beauty, its etymological meaning is “perception,” the translation of the Greek word *aisthetikos*. This therefore means that beauty is perceived and felt before being an object of contemplation.

Plato may be considered the founder of the science of beauty. He thought that there exists beyond manifested things an absolute, spiritual “beauty,” which administers beauty to all that exists on the earthly plane. He also said that the more pure our thoughts are, the better we perceive and feel universal beauty, which according to him was an emanation of the Divine. Of course, beauty does not only express itself in the visible world, and

is not limited to how things look. There is also inner beauty, that of the soul, which transcends the body and shines through it.

The transcendental nature of beauty can be compared to the impulse that carries us towards everything that is akin to the Good, as was magnificently expressed by the great Neoplatonist Plotinus. This inspired mystic had a fondness for revealing beauty by associating it with what he referred to as the “inner eye,” which he said has to open when we perceive what is beautiful in all things and all beings. This is what he stated:

The soul, therefore, must be accustomed first of all to contemplate beautiful pursuits, and next beautiful works... After this, contemplate the souls of those who are the authors of such beautiful actions. How, then, may you behold the beauty of a virtuous soul? Withdraw into yourself and look; and if you do not yet behold yourself as beautiful, do as does the maker of a statue which is to be beautiful; for this person cuts away, shaves down, smooths, and cleans it, until the sculptor has made manifest in the statue the beauty of the face which he or she portrays. So with yourself. Cut away that which is superfluous, straighten that which is crooked, purify that which is obscure: labor to make all bright, and never cease to fashion your statue until there shall shine out upon you the deity-like splendor of virtue... For one who beholds must be akin to that which one beholds, and must, before one comes to this

vision, be transformed into its likeness. Never could the eye have looked upon the Sun had it not become Sun-like, and never can the soul see Beauty unless she has become beautiful.

The perception of beauty follows a progression. Beauty has to appeal to the senses, and then to the mind and the emotions, before reaching the soul itself. There is an artist behind every work of art, but when considered perfect, it transcends the personality of its creator, and expresses an aspect of the Divine. God, in the sense of Universal Intelligence or Consciousness, is therefore present in the pure and genuine feeling of beauty, for beauty is one of God's attributes. Speaking of beauty in art, Augustine said:

Beauty is the inevitable, albeit half-erased, imprint of the Divine Hand. For a work of art to be truly beautiful, it must be part of those ratios which bring this world into being. In all the arts, proportion and harmony are what please. When there is harmony, all is beautiful. This harmony yearns for equality and unity. Beauty always takes the form of unity.

While Divine Beauty can be directly perceived and received through inspiration, it is only when the artist gives it material form that it becomes beauty for the ordinary person. It is then a work of art, the quintessence and archetype of which arise in the higher planes of Creation. This means to say that beauty—such as it manifests

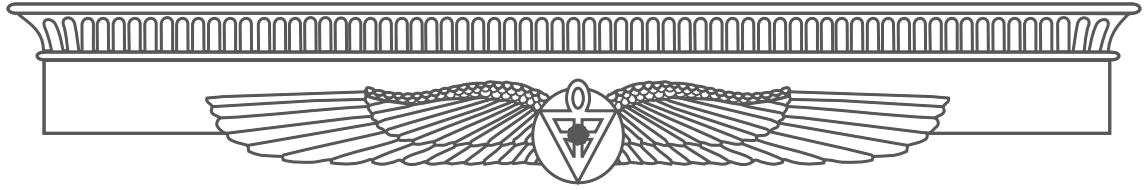
here below through nature and humanity's works—should lead us to become aware of Divine Beauty. This is to say that its purpose is to raise us in consciousness towards the Divine. This is because our soul is an emanation of the Universal Soul, and it feels and expresses that which is most divine in itself by means of that which is beautiful.

While it is important to be receptive to beauty and to avail ourselves of it on all planes, it is equally important to manifest it—meaning create it, apart from within the arts. Therefore in each of our thoughts, words, and actions, we should endeavor to express beauty, and thus demonstrate

the harmonic relationship that connects us to the Divine, as we conceive and feel the Divine to be. The more spiritually evolved a person is, the more aware they are of beauty, and the more they become able to create it in and around themselves, thus generating a trace of the Divine on the earthly plane, for the delight of humankind.

In conclusion, we should cultivate our awareness of the beauty of things, not for the things themselves, but for the harmony that radiates from them, which through them is manifesting Divine Beauty. To be aware of what is beautiful is to open a window onto the Divine World and draw closer to Divine Wisdom; it is to experience Universal Love, of which it is said is the life and light of all things in the universe. Thus Rumi was moved to say: "That which the Divine said to the rose thereby making its beauty unfold, the Divine said to my heart and caused it to be a hundred times more beautiful."





ROSICRUCIAN ONTOLOGY

The Divine is the Universal Intelligence that thought, manifested, and animated all Creation according to unchanging perfect laws.

All of Creation is permeated by a Universal Soul that evolves toward the perfection of its own nature.

Life is the vehicle for cosmic evolution, such as it manifests in the universe and on Earth.

Matter owes its existence to a vibratory energy that is propagated throughout the entire universe and which permeates each atom.

Time and space are states of consciousness and do not have any material reality independent from humans.

The human being is a double being in his or her nature and triple in her or his manifestation.

The soul incarnates in the body of a child at the first inhalation, making the child a living and conscious being.



Our destiny is determined by the manner in which we apply our free will and by the karma resulting from this.

Death occurs with the last breath and results in the final separation between the body and the soul.

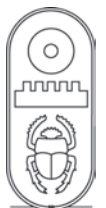
The spiritual evolution of humans is ruled by reincarnation, and its ultimate purpose is to reach Perfection.

There is a supra-human kingdom, formed by all the disincarnated souls populating the invisible world.

After completing its spiritual evolution, the soul of each human being reintegrates with the Universal Soul in all purity and lives in the Divine Immanence in full consciousness.

With its twelve major laws, this text summarizes the Rosicrucian Ontology, meaning the ideas Rosicrucians have about Creation in general and humans in particular.

We must nevertheless indicate that these laws are not dogmatic.





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